



Professor Teboho Moja, Image provided

Join us on **Facebook**
Follow us on **Twitter**

Related Links

AFRICA

African HE can be more competitive through 4IR technologies

AFRICA

Duality of knowledge paradigms requires institutional agility

AFRICA

Explore new ways to restructure knowledge production

AFRICA

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

AFRICA

'Rebuild the intellectual community on the continent'

AFRICA

'Change the knowledge economy into a knowledge democracy'

AFRICA

Systemic decolonisation needs a pan-African approach

GLOBAL

To sustain life, Euro-American epistemic hegemony must end

AFRICA

Lecturers are key to ending colonial epistemicide

Featured Employers



Latest Vacancies in HE

ITALY

Principal

European University Institute

AFRICA

Universities should be dynamic, 'transformative spaces'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 24 November 2022

Share Tweet Share 22

Universities in Africa need to be more dynamic and open to new initiatives as they seek to deliver on their mandate of advancing the domestic, social and economic development of their societies, according to Teboho Moja, professor of higher education at New York University, USA.

In particular, they must offer students comprehensive support so that they can succeed at university, have a positive university experience, and eventually find jobs and are equipped to contribute to their societies, she says.

Universities should also be more flexible in how they deploy their own human capital. "Fostering young scholars does not necessarily mean getting rid of the more experienced, wiser and older members of the professoriate," Moja notes.

They should also engage in a continuous process of reviewing their own academic and pedagogic provision so that new, more effective forms of teaching and scholarship may be identified and adopted.

At the same time, Moja adds, there can be a contradiction between the role that universities ascribe to themselves and the role ascribed to them by students – for example, in relation to whether higher education institutions are there to prepare students for the world of work or to help them become "good human beings in society".

"The debate has increasingly focussed on providing students with high-level skills to advance economic development within a globalised economy," she says.

"Accordingly, the human development component of higher education has been continuously de-prioritised to the point that the students, themselves, increasingly look only for training in skills that will help them find jobs."

Humanities scaled down

Moja observes that one of the consequences of this has been that many humanities departments have been scaled back or closed.

"At the same time, in their quest to increase their funding streams through tuition fees, universities are starting to listen to students as clients, and are giving them what they want and what they demand, rather than what they may need."

She cites the phenomenon within the context of a "political unwillingness" to fund universities at the right level, which has been compounded by a shortage of public funds to do so, as well as a public loss of confidence in higher education institutions.

Meanwhile, Moja, who worked in the South African higher education system and used to chair the board of the Centre for Higher Education Transformation based in that country, emphasises how important it is for higher education institutions to offer greater access and to ensure that such access will lead to success.

In an effort to ensure such success, universities must do more to create "a sense of belonging" among their students, she advises.

"If a university is taking somebody in, it is already saying: 'I have confidence that you can do this.' There is no point in having a revolving door where people come in, feel they do not belong and then leave. It is a waste of money, apart from anything else."

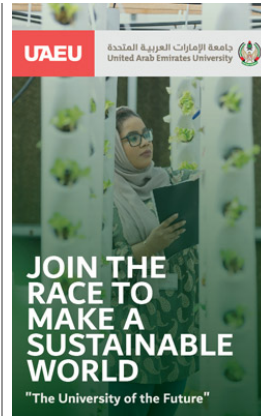
Student support

In other words, Moja argues, access must be coupled with student support, "although there are higher education programmes that fail to do this".

In this regard, she places particular emphasis on the challenges that may be faced by first-generation students, who tend to comprise the majority of those admitted through alternative access programmes. Such students, Moja notes, often do not know what to expect and what is expected of them.

"They do not bring with them the social capital of how to navigate the university space," she says. "For example, there may be opportunities and support systems that they are not harnessing because they do not even know that they exist."

So, access has to be coupled with the kind of support that can ensure the whole university experience "is a positive, nurturing and exciting experience, as well as an educational one", Moja says, which necessarily entails guiding the personal development of students in constructive ways as they enter adulthood.



"[Students] need to be nurtured if they are to be shaped into the kind of people who will care about society when they leave. This function of universities is lost if the focus is just on mechanically producing students with degrees, who are left to find themselves and decide what they want to do only once they have left."

Rather, she says, students must be taken by the hand upon entry to universities, during their time there and on their way out, "so that they can be successful human beings and contribute to society".

Knowledge from Africa

In the African context, students may also be supported in their studies through greater provision of knowledge generated on and for the continent, according to Moja.

"Instead of starting by providing students with information that comes from elsewhere and may have little bearing on their lives – thus creating frustration and alienation among the cohort – universities should study contexts and environments which the students are familiar with and use them as a starting point before moving into other spheres."

As part of this, universities in Africa should also be making greater efforts to embrace the significant volume of new knowledge that is being produced in Africa and which is published in journals and books in the West, "but which is seldom incorporated into curricula on the continent", she points out.

Universities can also foster their relevance by engaging in transformation "as a process" and adopting an image of themselves as "dynamic institutions that are open to change and responsive to new demands and new issues", she says.

Harnessing human capital

One of the ways of producing this kind of institutional culture is to be "more flexible in the deployment of the human capital" at their disposal, with the goal of "bringing in the younger generation so that their new ideas and energy can be harnessed".

"In African universities, there is a broad tendency to treat early-career scholars as worker bees who are delegated to teach large classes and are not given the opportunity to undertake research," Moja explains.

Meanwhile, older members of the professoriate "who reach their expiry date at 65 are forced to leave, regardless".

"An alternative model would be to offer set-term contracts to those older academics who would otherwise retire to teach or co-teach the undergraduate classes and grade the papers, thus freeing the young scholars to undertake research and to learn how to teach properly," suggests Moja.

In this regard, she says that lessons may be learned from the model adopted at New York University, where she is a professor: "Early-career scholars are given the lightest teaching load so that they can spend more time mapping out their research agendas, undertaking research and establishing themselves in their careers. To this end, they are also able to access platforms for mentorship, and so on."

In the quest for institutional dynamism, Moja also advocates the continual introduction of new initiatives as appropriate – the aim being to create a lively institution "instead of one where the governing ethos is 'business as usual'."

The aim should be to create "a fundamentally transformative space which goes beyond the rhetoric of transformation; a space where the leadership is prepared to take risks by encouraging its academic staff to try and realise their ideas for scholarship and teaching".

Moja argues that, in such a space, where change becomes the norm, the curriculum also should no longer be regarded as sacrosanct.

"I would say that, if you want to stay relevant, there is nothing wrong in turning the whole curriculum upside-down," she says.

Looking into the future, Moja would like to see the African university as a space "that provides quality education and that produces skilled, well-rounded graduates who care about society in the spirit of *ubuntu*, while advancing themselves".

"If Africans embrace and harness their own indigenous knowledge, supplementing it with other bodies of knowledge that connect them to the rest of the world, that way they will be able to make a great contribution," she adds.

This article is based on an interview conducted by Dr Alude Mahali 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.

Receive UWN's free weekly e-newsletters

HE and research and the UN SDGs

Universities at the forefront



Sponsored Article



A new global university ranking with an ethical mission

Aftab Dean

A new university ranking system aims to serve as a catalyst for positive transformation in higher education, ensuring that universities create an environment grounded in integrity and sustainability that inspires and supports students and staff in the development of novel solutions to global challenges.

[Promoted by Globethics.net.](#)

Sponsored Article



SDG progress report launches university into new territory

University of Pretoria staff

In the publication of its first progress report on its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, the University of Pretoria is navigating new territory at the same time as it is acknowledging its clear stewardship role in protecting the environment and biodiversity.

[Promoted by the University of Pretoria.](#)

Sponsored Article



Researchers in the UAE tackle water scarcity at its core

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

Please fill in your details below to subscribe to our service.

Email

Title

First Name

Last Name

Job Title

Organisation

Country

I check my email on my phone

Please send me the following emails:

Global Newsletter (weekly)


Africa Newsletter (weekly)

UWN event invitations and other UWN emails

To be able to support its journalism, UWN relies on being able to invite readers to participate in its webinars and other events supported by partnerships.

I agree that my data will be stored and processed according to UWN's terms & conditions.

Please click the reCAPTCHA checkbox below

I'm not a robot  reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit Subscription

the United Arab Emirates University, is providing solutions for the efficient exploration, development, use, storage and sustainability of the precious resource.

Promoted by United Arab Emirates University.

Top Stories Last Week

AFRICA

Do universities in the Sub-Saharan serve the public good?

AFRICA

Are political science departments failing to aid democracy?

EAST AFRICA-NORTH AFRICA

Open science drive gets buy-in from university leaders

AFRICA-GLOBAL

LDC youth seek better access to education, food security

AFRICA

Programme aims to train a pipeline of ocean scientists

SOUTH AFRICA

Report calls for professional standards for TVET lecturers

LIBYA

Digital transformation plan launched, but in need of funding

AFRICA

Project is advancing HE network connectivity on continent

AFRICA

The arduous journey to establish a successful journal

KENYA

Young researcher aims to produce cough syrup from snail slime