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Structural HE reforms required to balance knowledge, skills

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 19 January 2023

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If universities are to offer knowledge that is of actual use on a genuinely democratic basis, they must overhaul their processes of admission and assessment so that the learning capacity of all prospective students is recognised and fostered, according to Chris Bradford, co-founder of the African Leadership Academy and the African Leadership University (ALU), and of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program.

Instead, the notion of academic success, that is currently prized at most universities on the continent, favours students who have attended elite high schools and valorises individual characteristics that bear little relation to the kinds of skills that will be of value in the world beyond the campus gates, he says.

“At present, from a student’s perspective, acquisition of a degree entails having been tested for general intelligence; persistence – the student stays and does the work; and a level of social conformity – the student is not expelled,” says Bradford, who chairs the programme and innovation committee at ALU.

“However, I am unsure whether these factors for success correlate with acquiring the core skills required to transform the world – that is, whether universities are focused on what students are learning and the skills they are developing for the world beyond.”

Bradford asserts that, although university students may have met various indicators of intelligence on their path to graduation – having “stuck around”, “collected a set of credits, and managed not to get themselves kicked out” – they have not been assessed in relation to whether they can do what is required to become an “active, engaged citizen-leader, and a member of the workforce who can live a self-determined, mission-driven life”.

In this context, he argues, efforts to improve access to the tertiary sector in Africa may have little impact unless the experience of students is organised around the skills that they need to acquire in order to be successful after graduation.

‘Purpose-driven institutions’

To this end, Bradford proposes that African universities, as “purpose-driven educational institutions”, should be organised around promoting student success in the world as their main target outcome – and that the forms of assessment and regulation undertaken in relation to the continent’s higher education sector should be transformed accordingly.

At present, he notes, most undergraduate courses are assessed on the basis of the knowledge stored in the student’s short-term memory. Rather, he argues, assessment should be conducted on the basis of measuring both knowledge and skills, the aim being to produce people who have learned how to learn and who can address challenging problems throughout their lives.

“This is a different kind of assessment to the kind that tests students by providing them with problems that they know are coming and then asks them to solve these in an examination,” he says. “Too much assessment is organised around whether or not the brain’s pail has been filled with facts, which are then set down on paper.”

Universities, according to Bradford, are “getting the balance wrong”.

“They are too oriented towards demonstration and towards certain kinds of knowledge that can always be found on the internet anyway, and under-orientation towards undertaking complex experiential projects that force students to apply their knowledge and help to build the kind of skills that will allow them to succeed in the labour market.”

In this regard, Bradford argues that students should be assessed on their ability to develop skills and their capacity for learning. In general, “the discourse should be about how to bring the ways of knowing that are valued by universities closer to the ways of knowing that the world beyond values”.

How to gauge the capacity of students to learn

In the context of what he describes as the widespread inadequacy of current models of assessment, such a discourse would need to address the issue of how the capacity to learn – which Bradford considers a crucial precondition for effective engagement in education and society – may be assessed at scale.

“One solution in the online world would be to establish a pre-term comprising a set of knowledge and skills that all applicants for university would have to undertake and that would indicate their capacity to learn,” he said. “This would level the playing field between

pupils from the elite schools and other pupils.”

Similarly, Bradford argues, new criteria for regulating universities would need to be introduced, under which the authorities would judge them according to whether they are producing students who are ready for the outside world.

“In other words, they should be audited, not in relation to their infrastructure but rather at the back-end, according to the capacity of their graduates and the quality and rigour of the thought and principles underpinning the university’s establishment,” he says.

The establishment of a new, more engaged approach to higher education would entail the adoption of holistic admission policies and practices which would be more flexible in the criteria adopted to assess the suitability of would-be students.

“Universities tend to regulate admission and access based on what position a person has already achieved rather than their learning trajectory,” Bradford explains.

In this respect, he notes that the secondary examination regimes in Africa can be quite divorced from the skills that are needed for success at university and beyond, indicating a need to create pathways outside the core examination track.

“I think about how difficult it is for a young man from a refugee camp to collect the right certificates; and how the higher education system is building walls over which people must climb rather than gates that they can open,” he says.

“And I would like to figure out how to fix that.”

A holistic admissions process

In the quest for an answer, he advises that one way forward may be to adopt an holistic admissions process that not only assesses the rigour of an individual’s education, but also their performance relative to their context.

Bradford cites as an example a student from a poor, rural area of Senegal who was the only person in his high school to matriculate, although only with an E grade, relative to pupils from high-quality secondary schools in the city.

“Nevertheless,” he says, “this pupil was extremely bright and extremely driven and, in the context of his home region, many standard deviations above the mean.”

In this regard, Bradford emphasises that he is not advocating lowering standards, which, he says, is how people often interpret his focus on fostering habits of learning. Rather, he argues, there should be rigorous assessment of “the right things”.

“In other words, admissions policies ... should allow students to demonstrate the knowledge to which they have had access and the learning skills they have started to acquire insofar as these are indicative of success at university.”

Once admission to university has been achieved, first-year students should undertake a course on how they may best leverage the courses and experiences on offer at the university to practical effect.

To this end, “the most successful students should become prototypes, particularly for first-generation students who may otherwise graduate without any job prospects or entrepreneurial know-how because the university never required them to develop the appropriate skills and they had no idea of how to acquire these for themselves”.

Indigenous knowledge

In relation to indigenous knowledge, Bradford argues that universities should “help students recognise the value of the various forms of knowledge that exist all around them and, in particular, how indigenous ways of transmitting knowledge can be crucial to their success as leaders”.

For example, in relation to medicine and pharmacy, he argues that healthcare outcomes in Africa were in some cases better and in some cases worse prior to the introduction of scientific Western approaches to medicine.

He points to the example of the way China has integrated its traditional medicine with Western medicine, so that, when an individual has an ailment, they are provided with a choice of treatments.

In this regard, Bradford notes, it is important for African students to recognise that, “as future African leaders seeking to foster peace and shared prosperity, they need to study, respect and learn how to use traditional systems of knowledge, which are well understood by local African constituencies and which may be communicated orally through stories or symbolically through customs”.

“Modern Africa’s founding fathers had much to contribute in relation to this idea,” he notes.

“For example, Tanzania’s founding father, Julius Nyerere, valorised farmers’ ways of knowing and argued that, unless intellectuals and schools embraced such practical forms of knowledge, they were of little use.”

This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers and Mamela Siwendu 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

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