



Image: iStock

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

Related Links

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

AFRICA-GLOBAL
Book on decolonisation reflects on difference, oppression

SOUTH AFRICA
Dismantling colonisation's 'pedagogy of big lies'

Featured Employers



Latest Vacancies in HE

ITALY
Principal
European University Institute

AFRICA

'Rebuild the intellectual community on the continent'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 08 September 2022

[Share](#) [Tweet](#) [Share 391](#)

Neo-liberalism has devastated African universities, turning them from vibrant centres of new thinking and academic comradeship into factories churning out marketable academic products and "saleable" students, according to leading Tanzanian scholar-activist Issa Shivji.

African scholars have become mere data "hunter-gatherers" instead of producers of theory; while the nascent radical intellectual community that emerged on the continent in the wake of independence has been decimated, says Shivji, who occupies the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Research Chair in Pan-African Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam.

In the meantime, the Global North has retained control over the upper reaches of knowledge production since the 1970s, when higher education on the continent was devalorised and starved of public resources as African governments embraced neo-liberal prescriptions and austerity programmes.

"The very idea of the university was undermined," says Shivji.

"The World Bank and its associates said that Africa did not need thinkers; rather, it needed only implementers of policies," he says. "The 'luxury' of theorising could be left to the developed North, which would do the thinking, while Africa did the acting."

Under the "long shadow" of neoliberalism, he says, "the market determined the form, content and depth [of] courses. Theory was eschewed; and action and a skills-oriented approach were privileged."

"Instead of being centres of thinking and basic research, African universities were turned into sort of factories, with the academics being told to package and brand their products, including the students, to make them 'saleable'."

One consequence has been a devaluation of the quest for original knowledge on the continent and, in particular, theory, which Shivji views as the "highest form of knowledge".

Quality of African scholarship has deteriorated

The trend has been made manifest, he says, in a number of ways: the content of PhDs has become increasingly descriptive rather than theoretical; the academic vocation to produce new knowledge has been undermined by scholars' increasing dependence on consultancy work; university courses have become vocationalised, with increasing numbers of "executive evening courses" being taught; the younger generation of academics unquestioningly imbibe intellectual fads with little regard for existing scholarship; and the task of mentoring young faculty is undertaken by visiting scholars on a jaunt.

Shivji identifies a lack of seriousness among "today's neo-liberal generation of young faculty members who neither care about nor have any sense of the traditions of their own alma mater".

In particular, he notes that young African academics educated "outside", in the North, tend to return as adherents of new intellectual fashions: "It is as if they want to re-invent the wheel and start all over again."

Meanwhile, as the quality of the African scholarship on offer has deteriorated, international financial institutions have "jumped on the bandwagon", providing funding for foreign scholars to come from the North with the goal of upgrading local scholarly standards, according to Shivji.

"These visiting academics ... come for a few weeks or a couple of months; rush through a couple of courses; take time off to visit local tourist resorts; and off they go, leaving behind no sense of academic collegiality and camaraderie, which should be the stuff of university life," he says.

However, "this is not what universities were meant to be", he argues.

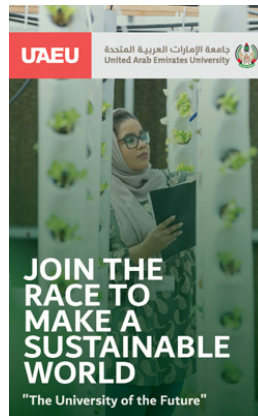
'A site for thinking'

"Neo-liberalisation, in my view, devastated the fundamental rationale of a university just as it devastated the social fabric in Africa. The very idea of the university was undermined."

Shivji describes his idea of the university as "rather orthodox".

"I think a university is a site for thinking, a site for the production of knowledge, and, of course, a site where ideas clash and knowledge is developed."

"The idea of the university should be of a kind of comradeship which is




Inspiring An Inclusive Future for International Education


IREG 2023 CONFERENCE
26-28 April
Rankings and university international exposure
TASHKENT • SAMARKAND



bett London 29-31 March 2023
A Live Event

Don't miss out on the world's biggest week in education

Get your free ticket by **3 March 2023**



International Higher Education
Winter Issue No. 113, 2023

LEARN MORE



established among the faculty but also between the students and the whole academic community. The aim is not simply to produce people with certificates but rather to cultivate deep scholarship and, if possible, some societal commitment.”

In pursuit of this goal, Shivji advocates a pan-African approach under which academics across the continent collaborate to rejuvenate the African intellectual community and seek to produce a new breed of ideas.

He notes the scale of the rejuvenation effort given that “a whole generation of deep, committed scholarship” was lost under the neo-liberalisation of universities from the late 1970s.

“The few faculty members who stuck to their guns found themselves abandoned both by colleagues and students,” he notes. As a result, “the radical and nationalist faculty staff failed to reproduce itself”.

“What remained was not an intellectual community propounding, advocating and debating the idea of the university and its ethos, but only a few individuals,” he says.

A need for collective purpose

In this context, Shivji advocates for a restoration of comradeship and a sense of collective purpose among academics in order to help rebuild the intellectual community on the continent.

“Such work can only be a collective effort, not an individual task,” he explains.

“Although individuals may manage to spark debates, they cannot easily sustain them. They soon get demoralised for lack of support; and there is always a limit to how much an individual can withstand in terms of derision and ridicule from an ignorant young faculty and a hostile university administration.”

Shivji also envisages the university’s restoration as a pan-African project although, at the same time, he stresses that national governments “must be persuaded that [higher] education is a priority on the basis that, like health, it is a strategic productive sector rather than just a service sector”.

Shivji’s argument for a continent-wide pan-African approach is based on what he terms “the fragility of the idea of nationalism based on the nation-state” and separate territorial domains; and also on what he views as the strength of regionalism in the African context.

“Unlike in other continents, regionalism in Africa – that is, pan-Africanism – gave birth to territorial nationalism, not the other way around,” he says.

Accordingly, he proposes that the effort to reclaim the idea of the university and build an African intellectual community “should take place as a pan-African endeavour at the continental level”.

Reclaim the ability to theorise

Adopting such an approach, Shivji contends, the present nature of African knowledge production can be transformed and African academia can reclaim its credibility and capacity to theorise.

“I think a new breed of ideas is required, which depends on many discussions, and debates being held at every opportunity ... among African intellectuals.

“So, there is a need to engage in a double process: the process of building a pan-African intellectual community; and the process of raising these important questions.”

Shivji cites the collegial nature of the former University of East Africa, which had campuses in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, as an example of the kind of pan-African collaboration that could be fostered.

“There were annual meetings bringing together the subject teachers from the different disciplines at the three sister colleges [in Dar es Salaam, Kampala and Nairobi]. Views were exchanged on the content of the courses; on the work being undertaken; on the pedagogy, and so on,” he recalls.

“These discussions were very fruitful, indicating how the task of changing orientation cannot be an individual endeavour; if it is to be effective, it must always be a collective enterprise.”

Shivji contrasts this collaboration with the present academic climate, in which, for example, “few intellectuals in universities in other African countries know about or keep track of the debates taking place in South Africa”, and vice versa.

However, such is the kind of pan-African interaction that he would like to see as “a starting point” for the restoration of African academic endeavour, although he emphasises that this “cannot be left to happen spontaneously”.

“It should be undertaken in a conscious and conscientious way.”

This is imperative, says Shivji, particularly since “the continent cannot continue to depend on the North to revive its universities”.

“The North is not interested and understandably so. Higher education has become a major export for some countries in the North. Why, then, should they invest in reviving African universities?”

From a practical point of view, Shivji advises that South Africa, which became a destination for many academics leaving other African countries as their universities were starved of resources, has the potential to provide the leadership required to rebuild the African intellectual community.

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

“I would hope that greater energy and thinking in the South African academy may be directed at supporting and building relations with universities in other African countries, not in a predatory fashion but in the spirit of genuine pan-African collegiality,” he says.

“In this regard, the South African academy should plug into African debates, and not be constantly overawed by European debates.”

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Crain Soudien 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.*

Receive UWN's free weekly e-newsletters

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