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Professor Tade Aina, Image: TrustAfrica

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## Africa cannot afford 'the old ways of thinking' anymore

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 20 February 2025



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Contestation over the nature of knowledge and how students are being taught is mounting as new universities and think tanks challenge traditional approaches to higher education across Africa, says Professor Tade Aina, senior director of the higher education and research in Africa programme at the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Arguing that the continent has been swept by a “wave of innovation” as a result of globalisation, the onset of the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions, COVID-19 and the present climate crisis, he says that new higher education and research practices, new ways of thinking and new forms of governance have emerged that defy dominant conceptualisations of academic work on the continent.

“There are sites in African higher education that are innovating outside the traditional governance boundaries and visions of higher education,” the former chief impact and research officer at the Mastercard Foundation says.

The creation of new universities and new schools and centres in existing institutions is challenging the epistemological status quo and exerting pressure for change in the realm of knowledge production.

“The present establishment of new spaces for experimentation and innovation within and outside is producing new forms of contestation over the nature of knowledge which are leading to its being reconstituted in new, more interdisciplinary ways,” he says.

### Traditional structures challenged

The establishment of new ways of creating ideas is posing a challenge to “inherited notions of higher education”, Aina says. This is leading to a new imagination of how universities may be structured or restructured.

“Different departments and units from older universities are re-constituting themselves, maybe temporarily, in new forms,” he says. “At the same time, the smaller universities, which have the ability to be more flexible and nimbler, are re-forming, re-casting, re-interrogating themselves.”

In the process, there has been a “surreptitious subversion” of the knowledge ecosystem which has left traditional institutional governance structures struggling to keep pace with, or provide a vision for what is happening.

“It may be argued that the rulers and governance of many universities



are far behind what the practitioners on the ground in various units who have access to ideas and resources are already doing,” he says.

### **Promotion of new skills, epistemologies**

Meanwhile, the promotion of new skill sets and epistemologies by practitioners who can be “transcendental in their imagination of the possibilities for reconfiguring knowledge” is, Aina argues, crucial to Africa’s development.

“Africa as a continent cannot afford the luxury of the old ways of thinking anymore,” he says. To this end, the higher education sector needs to produce “cohorts of graduates who can combine and configure skills and knowledges in new and unprecedented ways” and promote more holistic forms of knowledge.

Arguing that there has been “a move to a pre-industrial revolution view of the nature of knowledge under which there was a unity among disciplines”, Aina notes that the forging of connections between indigenous and endogenous knowledges in Africa may contribute to a broader process of knowledge reconstitution that is taking place.

In this regard, and as part of the process of change and decolonisation, Aina says that Western epistemologies which frame thought in binary terms should be discarded and replaced by “advanced African thinking systems which consider the limitless continuities and shades of reality in the world”.

### **‘A brave new world’**

Universities on the continent should also embrace change in relation to the digital revolution that has created new ways of delivering and engaging in education.

Noting that “the nature of our humanity is being transformed by what has been called the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions”, he says that it has become increasingly common to imagine modes of providing education that would previously have been deemed “impossible”.

“Students who are not physically present can be engaged and taught simultaneously across distances of thousands of miles via cheap and widely available technology,” Aina says.

In addition, he argues that new forms of artificial intelligence have introduced “a brave new world”, changing the way young people think about access to knowledge and what they want in terms of such access.

In particular, Aina argues, students are no longer satisfied with the conventional ways in which universities offer education.

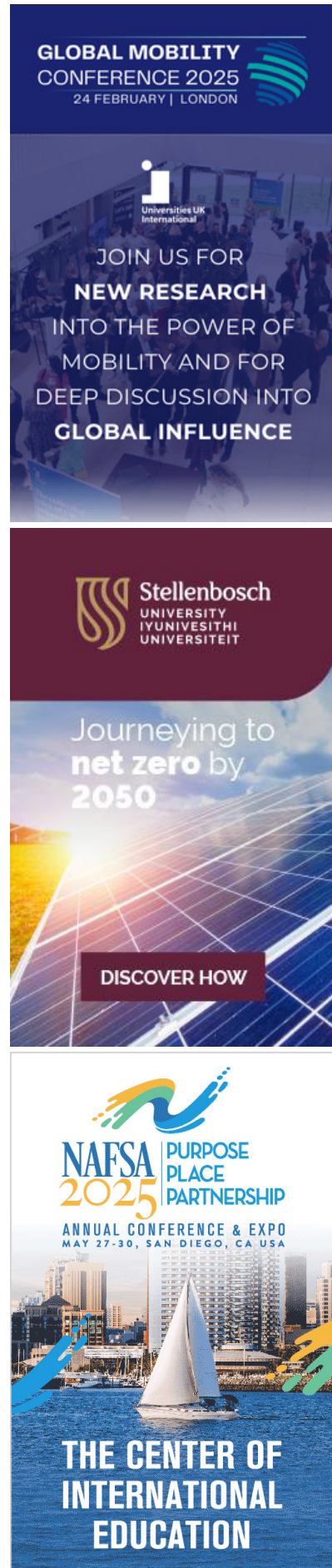
“So, for example, students are questioning the model of spending four years obtaining a bachelor degree and only then – and only if one is best in class – moving on to an MPhil and a PhD,” he says.

“People – both those who finished school and those who didn’t – are becoming increasingly impatient with the guardrails and the boundaries of studying and of higher education.”

He advises that students are looking for a “much more mixed offering” and gives warning that “this rejection [by students] of what has been taken for granted for so long is something that universities will have to address”.

### **Expansion**

From a practical perspective, the transformation of African higher education to promote new kinds of knowledge, and teaching and learning, depends on the establishment of a reformed system for





accrediting knowledge, and a re-imagination of how the sector can provide the educational spaces required for massification, according to Aina.

He says that there is a need to establish ways of regulating the sector so that the different forms of knowledge on offer can be validated and “harvested” properly and so that the potential of digital technologies as a means of expanding the provision of education can be realised.

Such regulation, Aina says, should ensure that “imposters, charlatans and adventurers are prevented from deploying online spaces to deceive millions of young Africans who are hungry for knowledge”.

He also calls for reform of the infrastructure through which knowledge has traditionally been delivered by the sector.

### Reconfiguration and reimagination

“Higher education reformers should question the old colonial thinking that at least 50 acres of land are needed for new institutions,” Aina says. “The point here is not that there is no value in a physical presence, but rather that it may take a different form than the old, massive constructions at universities which resemble citadels.

“Instead, for example, the site of an abandoned trade fair may be turned into a university complex. Malls may be reconstituted as spaces for higher education and technical training.”

In a similar vein, he advises that the whole conception of libraries should be transformed to establish an information and learning commons.

“Libraries should move from being places of silence to being areas of interaction,” he says.

Aina further advocates for the establishment of a new post of “chief innovation officer” at universities as a way of circumventing the conservatism that, he says, seems to characterise former academics once they become senior administrators.

Such an officer would be required “to think the unthinkable and see the unforeseeable” and harvest, represent and legitimise innovation across the university.

“In my imagination, [their job] would be to walk around the university and to sit and listen, perhaps on the steps outside the library, [perhaps] at the gate, to the students; to the cleaners and the staff; and to the young and old members of the faculties,” he says.

“Such a post could be filled by a young scholar or a contrarian thinker who is not scared of the power games in the institution and has no wish to become provost, vice-chancellor, chancellor or any such position.”

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Professors Crain Soudien and Thierry M Luescher, 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. Luescher and Mark Paterson edited the transcript for focus and length. Features already published in the series and a full transcript of the interview can be downloaded from the **HSRC’s website**.*

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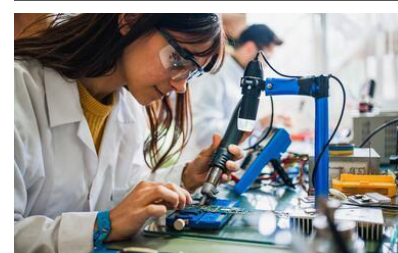
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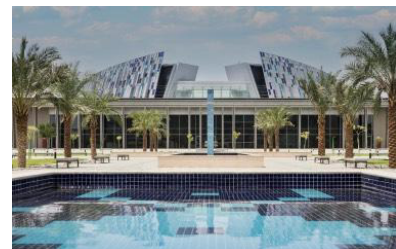
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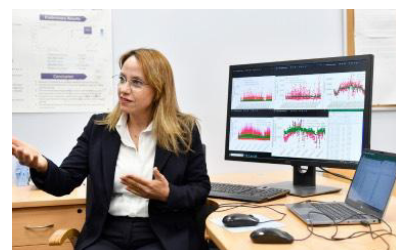
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