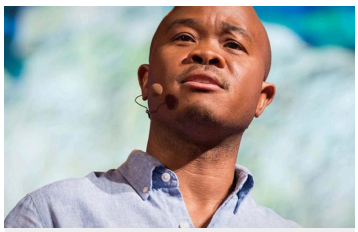

Fred Swaniker, Image: Empower Africa

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HE should birth 'problem-solvers, innovators, entrepreneurs'

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 06 March 2025

Universities in Africa should be prioritising the production of skilled graduates rather than knowledge, which they can access through other means, says Ghanaian entrepreneur Fred Swaniker, who is the founder and chief executive of a network of higher education institutions called the African Leadership Group.

The historical focus on knowledge production and dissemination as the primary function of universities is outdated, he says, now that the internet has made knowledge a democratically available resource.

"When knowledge used to be scarce, you had to go to university to get it from the brain of the professor or from the library book; but today, thanks to technology, knowledge is ubiquitous, it is abundant."

Accordingly, higher education on the continent should adapt to meet current needs, including, according to Swaniker, the need "for skills above everything else".

A dual goal

In this regard, he outlines a dual goal for the tertiary education sector, which is to equip young people with skills so that they can be employed or employ themselves, "because unemployment is the single biggest problem facing Africa right now"; and to cultivate new mindsets to produce people "who can think differently, challenge the status quo, and start from fresh principles in addressing the problems of Africa".

"The universities of today should be producing problem-solvers, innovators and entrepreneurs who can actually drive African society forward," said Swaniker. "The production of such graduates is the only way to justify the massive investments that have to be made in higher education."

He notes that, "unfortunately", universities are generally not prioritising this mission at present.

"Most professors have not worked in the real world, or they worked in the real world only 40 years ago. They're focused on reproducing themselves as a group, rather than trying to produce problem-solvers."

The question of accountability

Swaniker asserts that universities may be pushed to become more relevant if they are held to account for the changes that they produce in society and the effectiveness of their deployment of the resources

that they hold.

He also recommends that the criteria for measuring success in higher education need to be changed.

The university rankings consider research as the main output measure, but he advises that, instead, the performance of universities should be assessed according to "the number of lives that have been touched".

Facts and figures vs skills

In terms of outputs, Swaniker notes that the purpose of higher education should not be to acquire "those facts and figures which are available anytime".

"Rather, [it should be] about developing a particular mindset and an ability to learn which can be used for the rest of one's life – to become a lifelong learner and a problem-solver equipped to adapt even as the world changes."

To this end, Swaniker proposes introducing "student-driven" learning which places the emphasis on practical experience and problem-solving; and new forms of assessments which are based less on exams and more on the production of projects and portfolios.

In particular, he is seeking to establish a model that "takes learning outside the classroom".

"There are not enough partnerships with corporations, employers and the government, which can bring the real world into the classroom and take the classroom into the real world," he said.

In support of such a move, he cites research showing that, in acquiring a skill, only 10% of the necessary understanding is produced in the classroom, while 20% comes from developmental relationships with mentors and coaches and 70% comes from experience, "engaging with the real world through internships; attending committees; solving problems; building prototypes; conducting experiments; and implementing projects".

Digital skills in Africa

In this context, Swaniker views the acquisition of digital skills, in particular, as necessary for the continent's development.

"Universities will need to produce students ... who are equipped to live in a digital age, which is crucial if Africa is not to be left behind. An additional benefit of producing such a cohort of graduates is that the continent can then export its talent, but by working remotely – in other words, without the brain drain."

In practical terms and in order to address the issue of a lack of capacity within the tertiary sector, Swaniker envisages a higher education model that is centred on the students, rather than the teaching staff, as the driver of the learning process.

A different approach to education

Noting that the continent's universities are only able to absorb about 10% of the 20 million-odd pupils being produced on the continent every year, Swaniker says that it would take hundreds of years to produce enough professors to teach all these matriculating pupils.

"So, a different approach to post-school learning is required – one in which students can teach themselves, given the wide availability of information now available, as well as each other."

He also proposes leveraging distributed resources to produce an

educational equivalent of Uber: a global database of retired or semi-retired educational professionals who are prepared to give of their time to provide the mentorship, advice and coaching that students need.

“By tapping into such free resources – brilliant minds who want to share their knowledge – the cost of education can be significantly reduced and a cohort of mentors and coaches are provided for the students,” he said.

Swaniker also emphasises the importance of leveraging the knowledge that has already been produced in Africa and globally – and exploiting this to produce the solutions to Africa’s development challenges.

For example, despite prioritising the importance of skills rather than knowledge-production within the continent’s higher education system, he, nevertheless, acknowledges the need for “fundamental deep research that can push thinking in the social sciences or technology or engineering or whatever”.

Decolonisation

In a similar vein, he also opposes what he describes as a “romantic notion” of decolonisation which he sees as undermining the deployment of content and knowledge from the rest of the world.

“My view is that knowledge should be taken from wherever, if it is of use. I don’t care whether it is black, white, Indian or Chinese. If it can solve an African problem, I will take it.

“If there is a refusal of anything that comes from the West, then the continent will lose out on all the progress that has been made in other parts of the world using this knowledge.”

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 (HSRC), 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. A full transcript of the interview can be downloaded from the HSRC’s ***website****.*

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