

The Imprint of Education

The Imprint of Education (TIE) is a project of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation that is exploring the post-graduation trajectories of Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program alumni. TIE is investigating topics such as ethical and transformative leadership, give back, employment and entrepreneurship, student support and mentoring. It consists of five sub-projects or learning activities. The TIE project principal investigators are Prof. Sharlene Swartz, Dr Alude Mahali and Dr Andrea Juan.



Reimagining the African University – Conversation Series

Learning Activity Four consists of a series of conversations with experienced scholars and thought leaders on the future of higher education in Africa. In Reimagining the African University, they discuss challenges, best practices, and the potential for innovation to initiate further dialogue. This transcript is part of a series of interviews conducted in 2021 and may be used with appropriate attribution for scholarly purposes. The learning activity is coordinated by Prof. Thierry Luescher, under the intellectual leadership of Prof. Crain Soudien.

Interview with Prof Omotade “Tade” Akin Aina Interview conducted by Dr Alude Mahali on 12 May 2021

Alude Mahali: How would you describe your relationship with higher education on the African continent?

Omotade “Tade” Akin Aina: I would say that I have had a lifelong devotion to knowledge from an academic and practice point of view, but never as a cloistered academic. My career has been as a seeker and a practitioner, and that is why I call myself a “praca-academic”, that is, somebody who not only engages theoretically, but is also and has been involved in practice. Mine has been a journey with many pathways: from the university and the Department of Sociology to the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA); the Ford Foundation, where I held a governance portfolio and a higher education portfolio; the Carnegie Corporation of New York, where I was the director for higher education and libraries in Africa; and then at the Partnership for Social and Governance Research (PASGR), where I was the Executive Director and which is a network for higher education and public policy research and training currently working with more than forty universities on the continent. In all of this I always sought to produce published knowledge on the connections between practice and theory – on the range of thought and evidence around the various issues, and how this thinking influenced the institutions within which I or Africans more generally were operating and could be connected to particular practices to facilitate transformation and impact. Throughout, the focus has been on education as crucial to emancipation from, in the African context, disease, illiteracy, want and political domination, among other things. In this regard, I see knowledge as central to any process of transformation, because you cannot change what you do not know. You cannot change things if you do not know where you are coming from, what their root causes are, and if you do not know the system in which, or with which, you

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are working. So, education is as crucial to transformation as leadership. After all, you cannot be a true leader in Africa today if you are not knowledgeable and have some clear ideas of the emancipation of your people from the wicked development problems that confront us.

Mahali: From your experience, what do you see as the purpose, role and function of the university in Africa?

Aina: For almost 500 years there was no significant transformation in relation to the nature of the university in its western classical sense in that it was quite cloistered in its service to the state, the aristocracy and the economic and cultural powers that be. Only more recently in its life cycle that it has begun to foster public intellectuals who questioned the status quo and increasingly come to value contestation, alternative ideas, and creativity as key factors of thought production. But this does not mean that the university should be seen as always, the embodiment of such contestations. In significant ways it has traditionally pulled towards homogeneity rather than heterogeneity in the visioning of important social projects within some specific contexts. However, it has also shown itself as a space which allows for plurality in which, for example, shades of conservative thought exists alongside continua of progressive thought. This is the meaning of academic freedom. So, in this regard, the university may be viewed as a kind of intellectual and knowledge space where you as a scholar, academic or student will find your place as long as you are committed to or practice the pursuit of knowledge.

At the same time, this pursuit of knowledge and the rigorous standards according to which it is undertaken are generally the product of a particular body of scholarship which shapes what kind of thought is considered relevant or worthy. In other words, there is a political economy of knowledge production at both the local and global levels which can be quite resistant to self-reflection and self-criticism and hence the kinds of paradigm shifts which American physicist and educator Thomas Kuhn in “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” identified as producing new ways of thinking and shifts in paradigms. So, the university as an institution for knowledge production has often tended to be more a space that encourages reforms than transformations or radical shifts and ruptures in how things are done or how they work. In this regard, the history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge indicate a number of significant periods that led to the evolution of the university as an intellectual space – for example, the imperial eras in Japan, China, Africa and Western Europe – each of which led to the development of its own particular knowledge systems, practices and actors. Thus, historically, there was a pluriverse not a universe of knowledge systems. The imposition of monolithic forms emerged with colonization and more recent Western expansion across the world. But the common thread among the different forms has been that the university is a space with a collection of scholars and students across different hierarchies and disciplines devoted to disciplined study, research, teaching and in most cases public service. It has been a space for creating great change and an institution which sustains the status quo. Against this background, it is up to each university scholar, student or academic to define who they want to be in that space, what kind of work they want to do and whose ends and interests such work serves – and that is a political not an academic choice.

Mahali: Given what you describe as the lack of self-reflection among universities, are they still relevant as institutions given the governance and economic challenges facing Africa?

Aina: They remain very relevant because of the kind of space they constitute, which should not be taken for granted; and the possibilities that this space offers for their contexts to vision and imagine themselves and work collectively and confidently to realize the vision and their imagination of their institutions, their societies and the world at large. Thus, the narratives around universities are extensive, plural and diverse. Some see the role of universities as producing workers for the market, the industrial system or for the employment pipeline. This is important and necessary but not sufficient for social change or effective transformation. There are those who see universities as a space for critical reflection, contestation, innovation and creativity (albeit guided by rules, norms and standards of respectful but robust engagements) with the capacity to disrupt how economies function, societies organized and technologies deployed. There are those who see universities more as a terrain for the production of leaders or establishment figures, that is, the elite both intellectual, business and political. There are also those who see universities from a religious and/or ethical position as sustaining particular codes of behaviour and values within society. And of course there are those who see universities as a space for the production of public intellectuals, predominantly critical thinkers, that is, the consciences of society. The great thing about the contemporary university is that all of these are not mutually exclusive. In specific contexts and periods there might be greater emphasis on one form rather than the other. What is important is that those who collectively lead or guide the institutions are conscious of its slants and its many possibilities. So, it seems that the university is a wide space and that its greatest advantage is the way in which it can bring together these multifarious flows of knowledge and experiences, and a plurality of actors, allowing thought, knowledge, practices, ideas, creativity and innovation to flower.

Mahali: So, what are some of the competing visions for the university in the present discourse?

Aina: I think one of the biggest failures in the current discourse is the tendency to think of universities in dichotomous terms and not to see them as existing on a kind of spectrum along which there are a wide range of different functions that may be performed. So, for example, there are political leaders who are drawn to the idea of the university as serving the needs of the establishment, which harks back to the days when they were more monastic institutions – an era that gave birth to the use of clerical titles such as dean and provost which remain in use to this day or when they performed obvious colonial functions. Then there is the notion of polytechnics, the technical institutes that produced the hands and feet for the factory system under the industrial revolution – a role that traditional universities could not fulfil then as it concentrated on intellectual labour not technical work or the industrial professions. We still hear of the critique of the “vocalization” of the universities, something that Mahmood Mamdani did very well in the book, “Scholars in the Market Place”. But we know that with the range of different industrial revolutions, including the third and the fourth and the emergence of so-called knowledge societies and

economies, the university as a space has come to incorporate but not yet integrate the production and reproduction of knowledges and practices from the so-called intellectual and scientific work to those that support our technical, commercial, political and cultural functions. During this period, the university adapted itself to provide the education that had previously been provided by separate institutes dedicated to providing, for example, legal, medical or technical and vocational training. In other words, it has taken on the role of the guilds, modernising the training that they had previously offered. But this is a quite modern conception of the university and contrasts with the earlier idea of the university as essentially a terrain for the humanities and pure and applied sciences, which also persists to this day, including, for example, in the study of philosophy. So, it is clear that the idea of the university encompasses plural functions (and not just that of producing for a workforce as important as that is for most of our societies today. It is not a monolithic institution, but rather one from which society finds and produces what it needs at specific periods and contexts. In that sense, there are very few spaces like it.

Mahali: Taking account of these multiple views of the university and its functions, what is your current vision for the African university?

Aina: It is important to emphasise at the outset that the idea of the university as a centre for disciplined higher knowledge production and reproduction is not alien to Africa, as is shown by the University of Sankoré which was founded in Timbuktu in what is now Mali more than 1,000 years ago. Second, it should be acknowledged that there must be spaces for this kind of structure, an institution with a body of scholars engaged in disciplined learning, teaching, reflection and engagement with society. Third, that space must be rooted in the context of the host culture, economy and society. In this regard, it should be relevant in relation to the local labour market and the nature of governance and governing. It should help to foster the collective self-confidence of the people; promote the realisation that there are national and continental visions and goals; and support the pursuit of the highest values as these are defined within the traditions and civilisation of the people. In this way, the African university should be a humanistic, technological and scientific space for disciplined study, training, reflection, creativity, innovation and engagement and the production of various forms of knowledge that are relevant to, and transformative of, the specific societies it is in.

Mahali: How would the university that you imagine address the issues of access, funding, support and transition?

Aina: The notion of *the university* is a singular notion. However, the practice and experience of universities are diverse and plural. In other words, as my grandmother would say: “The sky is big enough for all kinds of birds.” In this sense, there is no such thing as one typical university, there is a plurality of universities. For example, there are universities without borders, that is, universities that are created and developed around distance education or the digital learning experience or e-learning or blended learning; and there are universities which constitute physical spaces, that is, single campuses or interconnected campuses within which there are institutional departments, as well as autonomous, or semi-autonomous institutes of advanced studies, which may include, for

example, centres of excellence in microbiology research or digital medicine, and so on. So, the reimagining of a single university is a philosophical exercise that does not truly reflect the expression of universities more broadly in our societies, such as South Africa, Kenya, Senegal, Ghana, Rwanda or Nigeria, which have diverse and plural populations and in which different universities will serve different needs at different points in the overall trajectories and visions of these countries and their regions.

So, for example, the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) or the University of Pretoria's (UP's) Future African campus are necessary spaces fulfilling particular academic functions in relation to innovation, research and reflection; while larger-scale efforts to provide technical education that produce engineers for the mining and banking industries are also a necessary function. But the main overall responsibility and challenge is to ensure that all the functions are managed, stewarded and transformed so that they are aligned with what society needs to reproduce itself as viable, sustainable, democratic and just systems.

In this respect, the vision of what the university offers cannot be a monolithic, singular one. Indeed, the implementation of the notion of an ideal, fully functional post-modern university requires significant efforts and resources such as are only available to a few higher education institutions on the continent.

The present model requires that a university should be able to deliver teaching and learning and knowledge production in line with a public responsibility which requires the institution to foster creativity, discipline and reflection in a way that meets the economic and other needs of the society. Historically, universities have never been required to fulfil such a complex and extensive mandate.

Mahali: So, how would you fund this ideal university?

Aina: Well, I am resisting this notion of the ideal university. Instead, I have advised people to develop universities with a particular orientation, set of goals and target populations and knowledges in mind in order to ensure their vision, mission, sustainability and viability. So, for example, the United States International University-Africa, which is a full-tuition private university in Kenya where the students are expected to pay for everything must offer its students a relevant degree that makes them competitive in the economy and society. This will be its basic value-for-money proposition. And such institutions tend to start by offering courses in market-oriented disciplines and subjects such as information technology (IT) and business, before moving into medicine and the professions, such as architecture. But the provision of such higher education need not and in this case does not exclude the provision of significant humanistic training, including the inculcation of the traits and values that produce active citizens with integrity, commitment and confidence, or the creation of a university culture that fosters potential leaders and social and economic inclusion and justice.

In all our contexts as Africans, it important to recognise that there cannot be one university for all purposes – but rather that there should be differentiation among them so that all the various functions of higher education can at least be achieved at the overall systemic level

However, if I were to be part of any university again, I would place the emphasis on, vision, mission, culture, and community-building as crucial aspects of the institution. Culture shapes the profile of students and determines whether an institution can produce Africans who are leaders, change-makers, critical thinkers and able to transform themselves, their families, communities and larger societies. Such is the institutional approach that informed the establishment of Ashesi University in Ghana. So, for me, the most important aspects are the vision, the mission, the culture, practices and the community that the university creates. Under this view, the key questions are: Who are the academics and the staff and students? what kind of people are they? What kind of community of actors will they become? How do they see their role in society and in the economy? What are their ethical priorities? What are their levels of self-awareness and commitment to a better individual and collective transformation?

Mahali: Can I ask you if there is a university you think embodies at least some of what you envision?

Aina: Yes, I already mentioned Ashesi University in Ghana in the sense that it is an intentional creation serving specific goals and needs. There are also a couple of small universities – Strathmore University in Nairobi, Kenya, and the Pan-Atlantic University in Lagos, Nigeria, both of which demonstrate the kind of intentionality in their establishment to which I am referring. Historically, such intentionality also informed the establishment of Harvard and Yale in the US, and even the establishment and development of Oxford and Cambridge, which took place in close alignment with the knowledge goals of their historical polity and society. What we need is vision, mission, culture, purpose and intentionality at scale.

To a great extent, such intentionality is missing in our public universities, where thousands of students enrol as random individuals in a quest to receive their meal tickets without much sense of vision, purpose, society or collective destiny. Insofar as they have a sense of mission, it is one that has been acquired from home, or from religion or from the streets. So, for me, it is this sense of intentionality and purpose which is the critical element that is missing from the current higher education landscape in Africa.

Mahali: What place does indigenous knowledge have in your vision of the university?

Aina: Indigenous knowledge is significant as it grounds us in greater depth than the narratives of our colonial experience. If you do not know yourself, you cannot transform yourself or your structure. It should also be emphasised that no knowledge is complete if it ignores other significant knowledges – which is the premise of undertaking a literature review when conducting original research: it provides a sense of the topography. In this context, colonisation centred forms of knowledge and within those forms, particular strands and approaches. For example, the emphasis in the social sciences has been on a

positivist approach to knowledge notwithstanding the virtues of a realist epistemology which emphasises the structural rather than immediately observable. There have always been many ways of knowing and many sources and types of knowledge. This clearly indicates that there is no monolithic way of knowing but rather a plurality of epistemologies and knowledges. The academic conundrum is made more complex for African academics and researchers who are always contesting and competing on the basis of what are termed other people's parameters and knowledge systems, even though many of these approaches and ways of knowing are no longer alien to us. While we are still on this point, it is important to acknowledge that the idea of indigeneity and indigenous knowledge as a fundamental epistemological form also is contested and contestable, not because it is not a valid way of knowing or knowledge systems but because our ontologies as Africans are not static and are in the process of forever becoming – our reality, our state of being – comprises both the indigenous and the endogenous. That is that knowledge production and co-production that is not precolonial and embedded in our states that existed before our colonial encounters but were the products of our autonomous creation and expression of our knowing and understanding irrespective of and despite our colonial encounters. These are our knowledges, our ways of knowing and modes of expressing such knowing. This is important because both indigenous and endogenous knowledge are and can be independent or engaged with emancipation from colonial knowing and neo-colonial knowing. This is a massive potential area of study that I believe the famous Pan Africanist Beninois thinker and philosopher, Paulin Houtondji began to explore many years ago. The challenge is to reject a monolithic conception of knowledge and knowing and to begin the decolonization of our knowledges through recentring diverse and pluriversal knowledges, knowing and epistemologies.

Concretely within the knowledge sub-system which is higher education in Africa, the components that are indigenous, endogenous and popular knowledge have historically been subordinated to the component of knowledge that is the product of Western scientific or established research. And given that knowledge systems are integrally related to cultures, this has rendered the quest for knowledge radically incomplete in the African contexts. The treatment of popular culture in South Africa which has arisen as a hybrid form in the cities and for most African cities too – for example, when indigenous and settler cultures have met, or when English or Afrikaans is mixed with Xhosa or Zulu – provides a case in point. When English as the official language was appropriated by the colonised it was called “pidgin” and dismissed as a vernacular rather than a language. Similarly, the day-to-day existence of the urban slum dweller also did not constitute a legitimate field of study. Meanwhile, the idea of indigeneity as a concept worthy of academic enquiry was promoted, but in a radically limited way, such as in the study of such esoteric phenomena as Shamanism. This is the challenge we face with engaging ways of knowing hitherto neglected or demeaned.

Mahali: What place do digital technologies have in the curriculum and in learning, in your vision of higher education?

Aina: A significant place because digital literacy is the new literacy. It is crucial that universities promote digital literacy if they are to keep pace with what is going on in society

and the economy in a world dominated by mobile telephony and mobile banking and all of tools of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In this respect, digital learning is building on the way people actually live today. And that is the most transformative kind of pedagogy; a pedagogy that meets people where they are. On a previous project, we proposed that all the books and texts required by students undertaking a collaborative Masters of research in public policy, which has now been established at the university of Pretoria, should be made available to them via their cell phones. That is where the world is going and it does not make the education less indigenous, less local, since we have already domesticated cell phones, appropriating them to our cultures and making them our digital tools.

Mahali: What are some of the obstacles to realising this vision that need to be overcome politically and in terms of policies and resources; and how might these obstacles best be addressed?

Aina: First, in terms of policy, the state has to reconfigure itself in relation to the higher education space. It must be an enabler, not an obstructer. For example, in some African countries, the blanket restriction of private universities and private education is obstructive. So, the state must let a hundred flowers bloom.

In this regard, apart from the importance of taking measures to protect the vulnerable among us in terms of access and success in education, I believe in infinite access. I am completely eclectic about the individual's capacity to make choices about how they want to access education, including the structures of higher education. I think education may be compared to a train which you can board, alight, and re-join as you see fit depending on the nature of your journey. In this respect, an individual should not be prevented from proceeding to secondary or university education solely on the technical basis that they did not complete their primary education or some other certification-determined basis only. Rather the assessment should be made because of their life experiences, including how they may have trained themselves in various ways. So, that is an area that is worth rethinking and the regulatory bodies should adopt the role of enablers rather than gate keepers in this regard.

Second, there should be greater creativity and innovation around the issue of resourcing higher education institutions and access to them. So, for example, the task of acquiring the accreditation required to establish an educational institution can be unnecessarily onerous. The regulations need to be rethought in this regard. In addition, public policy must be rethought to ensure universal access. Such access may be enhanced through the provision of more digital and blended learning and the provision of resources such as scholarships and tuition and other creative means of ensuring that those who show volition and an interest in studying are supported.

In this context, one of the greatest education challenges faced on the continent today is that there are many people who want to go to school but cannot because they lack the resources – they may not be able to afford the time away from their farms and their cattle, for example, or they may not have the money to pay for school, for the shoes, the uniforms, the books and, in some cases, even the benches and tables.

In addition to rethinking access, the dimensions of success also need to be rethought. To this end, a reasonable, functional notion of when primary education may be considered to have been completed should be forged; and the current rigid curriculum structures of secondary education should be reformed. Then, at the tertiary level, it is important that a diversity of institutions be established to meet the multiplicity of educational needs: polytechnics; technical institutes; nursing schools; lab technology schools; and, of course, academic spaces that enable the study of, say, Shona pre-colonial proverbs or geology or astronomy, and so on. And it will take a bit of leadership and understanding – and less arrogance – to produce such differentiation within the system.

So, those are the big issues: the need for government policy and efforts to remove unnecessary obstacles; the implementation of universal access based on the volition of would-be pupils and students; and the recognition that there are many forms of educational success and that there should be a plurality of higher education institutions which are fit for a multiplicity of purposes. If I want to be a dancer, I will want to receive a completely different education from that which would meet the needs of, say, an astrophysicist.

Mahali: How can African universities become more agile in response to all these demands?

Aina: Change the governance. For example, universities such as Pretoria, Wits, Dar, Ghana, Ibadan, Makerere and UCT could be endowed with their properties and the land on which they stand but with the stipulation that they must guarantee inclusivity and equity. With such a change in governance, the universities could move towards becoming their old selves, that is, independent of the monolithic structure governed by the minister of higher education. The point is that you cannot have one notion of what constitutes a university; your notion of equity should not lead to homogenisation. You cannot say that, in the cause of equity, everybody must be 6 ft 6 ins.