Interview with Dr Birgit Schreiber
Interview conducted by Prof Ibrahim Oanda 05 May 2021

Ibrahim Oanda: Please describe your academic background and work in higher education.

Birgit Schreiber: My most recent work as Senior Director of the Division for Student Affairs at Stellenbosch University in South Africa has focussed on: supporting students to be equipped to deal with what is expected of them in higher education; changing the context that they meet when they come to higher education; and mediating the factors that impact on them when they try and study and acquire a degree.

Oanda: What is your thinking about the purpose of the university in Africa and the present discourse around this?

Schreiber: In broad terms, the purpose is to make a better life for all. A core value for the university is to produce knowledge. In this respect, it may operate as an innovation or research hub for example. There is also an instrumentalist value. In this respect, depending on where the university is, it will have to achieve a particular outcome or set of outcomes. So, it might want to produce more teachers or doctors or nurses, or whatever. In this regard, it operates as an instrument of a need, whether that is a national or a regional need. It responds to a need that is defined, although the question of who defines that need and how is another story. Accordingly, the university has to have a tiered structure so that it can support the

pursuit of a number of goals. However, the overall aim must be to support the purposes to achieve a better life for all, whether that is through research, its graduate outputs or its curricula.

Oanda: Do you think there is a contradiction between the instrumentalist and the transformative roles of universities?

Schreiber: I think the two aspects can work hand-in-hand or in parallel, as has been shown by the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015. The SDGs seek to transform the world into a better place for everyone, while acting as a tool for implementing the required changes that this entails.

Oanda: Are universities more relevant than they used to be? Are they living up to expectations in terms of addressing the social concerns?

Schreiber: In a world that is so fragile and so depleted, those institutions which are functional are left to bear the burden of resolving the problems. In this regard, I think that the scope of what is expected of the universities is too broad. So, there is this expectation, for instance, that universities must transform society; secure employment; provide accommodation, food and transport; supply inoculations and protection against HIV protection; undertake scientific research; produce leaders; and so on. From a purely practical point of view, an institution that is designed to fulfil such a wide array of functions is unlikely to work. At the same time, given that universities are among the few institutions that function effectively, they have a responsibility to do what they can in meeting real-world, concrete needs.

Oanda: In this context, how relevant is the structure and the construct of the university in Africa today?

Schreiber: I think the university in Africa battles with similar issues to the university in Asia or South America or any other place. Africa struggles with similar issues to those faced across the world. Africa's struggles are not special in that they are solvable, they are manageable.

In this regard, India, which has undergone similar sufferings and has a similar history, offers an interesting case study. Each province in India has responded differently. There are some provinces that have undertaken exceptional work despite their suffering. Some have been rigorous about prioritising education as the surest way of making a better life for everyone. So, in relation to transport policy, universities are connected by free buses and safe roads. In relation to infrastructure policy, broken university waterpipes are fixed first. Meanwhile, education has been made a national priority and long-term plans are forged in support of this. In a similar fashion, national ministries in Africa could put

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education first. Although a national, collective commitment to this cause from people beyond the university is also required, if higher education institutions on the continent are to fulfil their mission to make a better life for everyone, including at the local level.

Oanda: In the literature, universities in Africa are portrayed in a number of ways. For example, one analysis recently compared the current state of the higher education sector with that during the era immediately after independence when the infrastructure was good and students who went on to become important people in society were being produced. By contrast, the educational quality of contemporary universities was characterised as little better than high schools in many cases.

Schreiber: I am a pragmatist in this regard. If a university does not work for reasons of corruption or because the money has gone missing or whatever, I say: "Close it down!" I do not have a romantic attachment to institutions. Universities which are taking money from students and the state and are producing hardly any graduates and little knowledge should not be supported. But there are many institutions, such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in South Africa; the University of Ibadan in Nigeria; Makerere University in Uganda; and the University of Botswana which are producing locally relevant and internationally interesting knowledge and which thus transcend their context and should be supported.

Oanda: So, how to strike a balance between the demand for universities to produce locally relevant knowledge and the demand that they should produce knowledge that can be ranked internationally, whatever that may mean?

Schreiber: I do not think these demands are contradictory. There are always locally defined needs, as well as needs that are linked to the global conscience. The goal must be to find ways of addressing both. The local and the global should not be mutually exclusive.

Oanda: People who have reservations about the relevance of African universities in Africa have started talking about alternatives for the university on the continent; a vision of an alternative African university.

Schreiber: I am not sure I know of an alternative vision that works.

Oanda: For example, in South Africa, people talk about the need for a new decolonised African university, or in other parts of Africa, for a university which better represents the aspirations of the African people.

Schreiber: I am not sure what an African university would look like and how that would differ from, say, a Mexican or a Hungarian or a Polish or a Vietnamese one.

I am not too sure what the model for that would be. I can only examine the idea if there is a definite vision, rather than just a claim that the model somehow needs to be different.

Ideally, universities comprise a space in which people develop along a spectrum from acquiring skills, competencies and knowledge to becoming responsible leaders. In general, this model works, although it needs to be made much more flexible and fluid so that people can enter and exit universities more easily in valuable ways. The higher education system should be much more articulated, including in support of vocational training. Kerala in India offers a good example of such a system. People can enter when they want; and they can exit with a certificate indicating the skills and understanding they have acquired, which may be used to enter places providing vocational training. The system is locally steered to meet local needs but is also linked to globally agreed values of human rights, democracy and social justice.

In this respect, there is a need for decolonisation in terms of engaging local people and students so that they can participate in the endeavour of education. The aims should be to bring students into this endeavour and to ensure that what is taught and learnt is relevant. But there is no value to abolishing universities *per se*, unless there is something to put in their place.

In terms of envisaging an African university of the future, higher education institutions on the continent need to be more interconnected, as those within the European Union (EU) are. So, for example, the University of Botswana should to be able to send its students to the University of Namibia in Windhoek for a semester. The University of Zimbabwe in Harare and the University of Pretoria, which are neighbours, should be able to send their students to and fro easily, fostering student mobility and exchanges. The universities can improve by being more regionally articulated within the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

In addition, the system should be way more differentiated and tiered. The idea that all universities should aspire to be research universities is absolute nonsense. In general, only 6% of universities are ranked as leading research institutions. Some universities produce excellent research; some excel in their teaching function, and so on. So, the goal should be to establish a textured, differentiated model, allowing students to enter and leave at different points according to their needs.

Oanda: How would the African university of the future deal with the issues of access, funding and student support?

Schreiber: At present the proportion of school leavers entering university stands at 20% to 30% in Africa, which is too little. Between 60% and 80% of school leavers should be joining the higher education system. Otherwise, it is not possible

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to turn a country around. There will not be enough taxpayers or skills or nurses or whatever. So, access to higher education needs to be expanded to produce more graduates – and such expanded access depends on the establishment of more competent primary schools and high schools.

Oanda: How do we fund this kind of expanded access?

Schreiber: The social-cultural context needs to be functional in order to improve the higher education system and support students. If the roads would be safer. If the drinking water would be cleaner. If the electricity supply would be more predictable. If pupils were properly fed. If crime rates dropped. In this regard, providing appropriate support to universities can only be addressed as a national question rather than a mere matter of sourcing additional funding from this foundation or that one.

For example, society should not demand that women who come to university should be required to have children or do the housework or head families. So, the issue of access is a macro social one, rather than just an institutional funding concern. Society as a whole must want to ensure greater access, which may entail ensuring there is transport to the universities and, at the family level, that the students are supported not just with money but also, by not making demands on them to undertake cleaning and housework.

Oanda: It is important to think about how the university can be reimagined, taking into account the diversity of the student cohort, including in terms of social background, gender, disability and identity.

Schreiber: In this regard, there are all kinds of work the university can undertake with its students on campus. In my work in student affairs over the past 20 years the goal has been to help students cope with their lives on campus; and, in general, students want to be on campus.

Under Covid-19 lockdowns, students were driven back home but the research found that many of them, particularly minority and vulnerable students, asked to return to campus because it is a safe space. It is a space where they can express themselves and are accommodated, whether they are homosexuals or HIV-positive or have disabilities. They are accommodated. Similarly, despite recent student unrest and student activism under which universities have become contested spaces, students want to be on campus because they are safer there than home. So, the issue is not that the universities need to be better spaces, but rather that they should be embedded in better societies. In fact, universities are spaces where students find mentoring, psychologists and support, including for disability. It is the surrounding society that is in a dire state. So, the issue is actually a macro social one rather than an institutional one for universities.

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Oanda: In this regard, maybe the university should be producing the kind of graduates who can foster social change and create employment.

Schreiber: One way of addressing the challenge of social change would be for the universities to embrace the SDG framework, thus, producing students who would not just be equipped to be a nurse or a scientist or whatever, but who would also be equipped to pursue their career as agents of sustainable social justice in the world. In this way, generations or cohorts of students would be produced who were not only capable of undertaking particular work but also of addressing the ills that they meet in the world.

Oanda: I read an interesting study conducted among Kenyan students at a leading private university which probed their attitudes towards corruption and found that they tended to accept it as the price of success and wealth. In other words, the university seemed to have been unable to change their thinking on key social justice issues.

Schreiber: So, returning to the model espoused in India, one solution is to consider the question of education in a holistic way, promoting the view that society needs to change. Accordingly, each ministry is required to align its efforts in support of this approach to education, which entails combatting corruption, crime and gender-based violence, and making sure the schools work. So, a larger vision is required.

Oanda: I think all the stakeholders should come to an agreement about the kind of society they want to create and how the universities are going to contribute to realising that vision.

Schreiber: And as part of this, the universities should come together and think about what kind of society they want within the framework of the SDGs, which represent an ambitious, globally agreed undertaking to create a world that is gender-fair, free of crime, safe, healthy, socially just, and so on. However, although every country has signed the agreement, few have actually considered how to realise its vision.

Accordingly, universities should imagine how they may address the challenges to achieving the vision proposed by the SDGs. In this regard, they have an important role to play in supporting the vulnerable on campus, levelling the higher education playing field for all so that it is more socially relevant and producing graduates who can actively contribute to social justice. So, the vision for universities in pursuit of the SDGs should be a layered one.

Oanda: What should be the role of indigenous knowledge in achieving this kind of vision of social justice?

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Schreiber: I think indigenous knowledges – that is, the production and teaching of knowledges that are locally relevant – are of value everywhere, although I am not sure whether Africa has any more wisdom than the rest of the world. In this respect, I do not concur with the idea that Africa somehow has some unique special knowledge that the rest of the world does not have. Rather, I think indigenous knowledges, whether they are German or Nigerian or whatever, are important regardless.

Oanda: What is the place of indigenous knowledge systems in terms of the kind of thinking that should be promoted and produced in higher education?

Schreiber: I think the issue here is one of practice. For example, in seeking to address the needs of its host society, a university may need to prioritise issues of religion if it is embedded in a particularly religious society. The point is that the university needs to be aligned with local practices. Beyond the issue of local relevance and local practices, however, I consider the notion of fundamentally distinct knowledges, such as French knowledge, or Mexican knowledge, or Egyptian knowledge, to be somewhat artificial in a world that increasingly shares knowledge across borders. Knowledge can be local, but not unique.

In this respect, this idea of unique indigenous knowledge may be viewed as a form of nationalism. A way of saying, for example, "because my language is French, I have French knowledge"; or "because I have brown skin, I somehow know something different (or more or less) than somebody with slanted eyes". I think such views are parochial or racist and nationalist in tone.

In fact, everyone has a number of identities: a cultural identity; a family identity; a language identity; a professional identity – and these are blended. So, it is no longer possible to say only "I am an African", or only "I am a woman" or only "I am white" or only "I am middle-aged". Identity goes way beyond that. The reality is that in different spaces "I" means different things and its identifiers are not absolute.

Oanda: In a fast-moving world, people seem to deploy parochial notions of identity as a platform to articulate what they think they want to become. A corollary in Africa has been that people identify particular aspects of the higher education system that they either try to exploit to their own advantage or decry as alien. In this context, there seems to be lack of clarity about precisely what comprises African indigenous knowledge systems and values and religions, and thus the kind of institution that should be created to embody these. In this respect, there is a tendency to conflate what may be termed the problem with the kind of solution that is being promoted.

Schreiber: Absolutely. So, for instance, when "African values" are being advanced, my view is that these should be democratic values that seek to advance human rights. In this context, the present debate about terminology in relation to values

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seems unproductive. Rather the approach should be to promote the few values that really matter, which are well defined, such as social justice, gender equality and human rights. My hope is that this idea of an African university should be constructed on the basis of these tangible values, around which there is a consensus and which are concerned with making a better life for everyone. So, rather than talking of African knowledge, or an African university with African values, I would advocate a discourse predicated on human rights values and couched in the language of human rights, since the actual aim is to solve the problems of the world.

Oanda: What do you see as the role of digital technologies in terms of designing the curriculum and in terms of learning?

Schreiber: Digital technologies provide useful tools to advance teaching and the reach and the depth of learning. However, learning cannot be reduced to what is communicated via a screen. The experience of being with someone; of being able to touch and reach them; of knowing what they feel like and how tall they are; of sharing the same surroundings and time of day, is completely different from peering at each other via a screen. To reduce learning to a digital moment would be a disservice to the nature of learning, which is much more textured than that and involves all the senses. However, although digital learning is narrow, distant and modern it provides great reach, which is of value.

Oanda: There is a view that, given that there is great inequity in the capacity for digital technologies there is a kind of domination and suppression embedded in the promotion and use of these technologies as a medium for learning. In other words, those who effectively own them will tell the rest of the world what they can learn.

Schreiber: So, there is a problem, for instance, when the British Council promotes the idea of a digital university for Africa, as if there could be one curriculum for the whole continent. But then that is a problem of curriculum design, producing a curriculum that is no longer locally relevant, rather than a problem of the digitalisation, which is essentially about deploying a new tool to reach students. In such cases, it is important to identify the actual nature of the problem. In this context, digital tools can prove useful in achieving the goal of decolonised education insofar as this is about making things relevant and including the learner as a participant. There is no contradiction there.

Oanda: What are the resource challenges given the present constraints?

Schreiber: Some of the best African universities work well, indicating that the problem is not inherent to the higher education system. However, these institutions cannot work in the face of corrupt governments that undermine basic educational processes. Meanwhile, universities comprise the most effective model

available for educating large groups of adults; a model that has been in existence for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, the system needs to be more tiered, more articulated and more differentiated. And governments need to provide greater support for the socio-economic context within which universities are embedded. If that happened, the system would work fine.

Oanda: So, the problem with higher education in Africa rests outside higher education, with what the governments are *not* doing. At the same time, there has been a widespread belief that there is something within higher education that needs to change and there have been a number of quite costly experiments tinkering with the functions of the system which have tended to only make things worse.

Schreiber: I think universities are imperfect but I cannot think of another model. This is all there is for the moment. So, the main responsibility for improving the higher education system rests with the governments and, in particular, the societies beyond the institutions, which need to support what the universities do, including in terms of housing, food, water and electricity and eradicating crime, among other such things.

Oanda: How can we realise an agile university in Africa?

Schreiber: Universities need to become much more cognisant of the SDGs which provide a strong model for change. Other than that, they need to embrace complexity if they are to become more agile in a changing world.

An interesting model for change is provided by the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) in Botswana which has developed standards for universities to support students. In an effort to develop locally attuned standards, the council sought to identify the conditions at each university with the aim of ensuring that appropriate support could then be offered to the students.

It would also be worth addressing the curse of the way in which universities are being ranked. For example, there are some universities which are ranked highly because of their performance at the postgraduate and research-chair level but have appalling undergraduate throughput rates. In this respect, there is little value in chasing rankings.

Oanda: From the curricula to the forms of management being adopted, people seem intoxicated with making sure they tick the boxes that will improve their institution's ranking.

Schreiber: I am not saying the universities should lower their standards; but rather that the international ranking systems are quite partial. For example, the Times Higher Education rankings only recently incorporated the SDGs as an

indicator – at which point the universities in Africa suddenly appeared to be performing quite well. So, there is a need to be cleverer about which ranking systems are deployed as a measure.

Oanda: Is there anything that you think we have not covered that you want us to include in this discussion?

Schreiber: I think for me what stands out is the local/global tension and that being decolonised means being locally relevant. In this regard, the goal must be that students and communities feel that they are in partnership with the universities; that they are responsible for the universities; and that they own them. In other words, they support the learning that goes on in the local context. At the same time, these locally embedded universities should have a global lens. So, they are concerned about the local forest being burnt and weapons being imported. There must be a dual lens connecting the global and the local.

Another important point is the one about making sure that graduates become agents of social justice once they leave university, which should increasingly be the case as the SDGs are rolled out in the university sector.

I think it is also important to stress that it would be misguided to seek to reinvent universities and the higher education system, which is not to say that there is no need for significant improvement, or that the institutions should not be more efficient and more focussed on the socio-economic context.

Oanda: It would be interesting to consider the African Union's (AU's) Agenda 2063, which incorporates many of the points made by the SDGs but in a purely African context, as an alternative benchmark for the development of universities on the continent.

Schreiber: But who can think that far ahead?

Oanda: Well, the agenda promotes social justice, as well as the promotion of continental integration and a vision of an end to conflict; so, it covers much of what we have been discussing.

Schreiber: The idea of such integration is interesting and points to what Africa. can learn from the rest of the world. For example, the European Union, despite its difficulties, represents an extraordinary contract for regional peace and prosperity under which there is great student mobility. A total of 70% of all students in the EU have travelled to at least two other universities. Similarly, on the Indian subcontinent, there is great collaboration among the states. Africa can learn much from these models, particularly given its present plight, under which movement is greatly restricted – for example, in the SADC region between Zimbabwe and Botswana.