

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 Laura Czerniewicz Interview conducted by Mr Krish Chetty on 10 May 2021

Krish Chetty: Could you talk a little about your professional journey; your main academic interests; and your present work at the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Technology at the University of Cape Town (UCT)?

Laura Czerniewicz: I have been in the university sector for about 20 years. Before that I worked in education in a number of roles, as a teacher, a teacher-trainer, a researcher and an educational publisher. Since I have been working in the university, I have established four different teaching-and-learning structures: one on educational technology; one on teaching and learning; one on open education; and one on multi-media education. The one thread that has run through my research work has been an interest in inequality and equity.

In relation to the issue of inequality, it is impossible to live in South Africa and not see everything through that lens; and you cannot work in education without being confronted with the nuances of equity and inequality. Every single African and South African university, no matter how highly “ranked” faces this reality.

At the same time, the interesting thing about inequality is that it is not just a South African phenomenon even though the country has most extreme Gini coefficient of those countries in the world for which data is available, which is nothing to be proud of. The evidence of inequality in higher education and in society is everywhere, as the Covid-19 pandemic revealed so clearly.

There are peripheries and centres, and there are hegemonies and those outside those hegemonies all across the world, both in the North and the South. For example, if you look at what is going on in education in the United States (US), which is one of the supposedly richest countries in the world, they are facing similar issues to those being faced in South Africa. For example, in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on education, the elite everywhere (including here) were fine in the school system and in higher education, banding together and possessing the cultural capital to know how to negotiate change and the social capital to find people to help them.

Chetty: In relation to the issue of digital inclusion it does not seem to occur to many in the North that there are gaps in relation to the extent to which the new technologies are available – and who will benefit and who will suffer as a result.

Czerniewicz: It is interesting because it depends on who you are talking to. So, even in the Scandinavian countries where the gap between rich and poor is relatively small, there are “haves” and “have nots”. In digital terms this may be expressed as a lack of access to affordable broadband which enables the use of synchronous technologies and thus the establishment of virtual classrooms. So, that is a different kind of “have not” which will have an impact on learning design and how classes may run. And there also seems to be the universal issue of an urban-rural divide.

Chetty: Do you often get the chance to collaborate with others across the continent?

Czerniewicz: Yes, and one of the ironies of Covid has been that it has been so much easier for people like me, who have got connectivity and flexibility and so on, to collaborate. One of the positive things that has come out of this is the ease with which academics now converse online.

Chetty: Turning to the notion of what may comprise the ideal African university, do you think there be such a thing or is this frame of reference unhelpful?

Czerniewicz: I do not think there is such a thing for several reasons. For a start, the idea of Africa as a place is problematic; and even within African countries the university sectors are so stratified that it is difficult to comment on the nature of these sectors. Indeed, the Covid period has really highlighted this stratification, with vulnerable institutions being forced to close.

So, no, I do not think there is such a thing as an “ideal” African university. Rather there are different types of universities in different settings; and there are universities with different types of missions. Accordingly, you might have a research-intensive university; you might have a university that has a more explicit public mission; and you might have some that genuinely have a social-justice or a public-good agenda. There are also some that might have a more of an innovation agenda; and there are some that are more locally focussed.

Similarly, the questions around indigenous knowledge, decolonised knowledge and local knowledge, are playing out in a lot of places – not only in Africa, but also in New Zealand and Canada, for example.

Chetty: Do you think there are any common principles among universities that could provide a unity of purpose?

Czerniewicz: They are united by their mission to create and disseminate knowledge, although the way in which this mission is undertaken, including in relation to the institution's guiding values, can vary. In particular, there can be a tendency to adopt a narrow perspective towards knowledge creation, which is linked closely to a quite parochial view of what constitutes graduate employability and how this may be achieved – all of which produces an instrumentalist, technicist approach to knowledge. Universities whose sole focus is employability in this sense may move to close humanities, social science and local languages departments, although such closures actually represent a false economy.

Chetty: Do you feel that universities across the continent are making as relevant a contribution as they could to the economy or to systems of governance?

Czerniewicz: When I attend webinars convened by groups of African universities and other such meetings, I worry about how the participants seem to get caught up with particular global discourses, almost as if the ideas produced in the North should be followed regardless.

I do not know if this is because of a lack of confidence in the continent's intellectual contribution or whether it is a tacit recognition of deep inequalities shaping access to research funding and opportunities to publish research.

In this context, I also dislike this adherence to the notion of the fourth industrial revolution, this kind of obsession with the latest something that everyone is supposed to be part of.

Chetty: Do you feel that universities are in touch with the demands of society? Do they know what is required? Are they mobile enough to reform and respond to changing trends, changing demands?

Czerniewicz: In my experience, universities are quite conservative and entrenched in their practices. Perhaps it is because student groups come and go, but institutions seem to be hard to change. Their governance structures are rigid and their culture seems so fixed. They are not generally adaptable and agile, which is frustrating if you work in the field of teaching and learning, and technology, which requires experimentation and the room to fail. The bureaucracy is not in place to enable that kind of agility.

Chetty: So, if the university is not the place for agility, is there a need for a new form of institution?

Czerniewicz: It is not that I don't think the university is a place for agility, but rather that they are doing a really bad job of it. I do not think the alternative is to create a different sector. Rather, knowledge creation, which comprises the fundamental role of universities, should take place in a number of different ways, including in relation to its governance and epistemology, as well as in relation to the disciplines that are used to categorise the process. At present, the way in which the disciplines are constituted represents a kind of holy space that cannot be violated; which makes it difficult to promote and implement multi-disciplinarity, for example.

Chetty: So, what do you suggest we change and how should we go about this? Do the organisations need to become more representative, perhaps by giving students a voice?

Czerniewicz: Universities reflect the broader society in which they are located and their agency as institutions is limited accordingly. They are subject to the laws of the land; the dominant national discourses of the land; and the country's economic constraints.

However, in terms of what universities should be like, a clear present concern is that they should not be under-funded. At the moment, universities are spending too much of their time raising money to undertake their core business. If they were properly funded as public institutions, they would not have to dedicate themselves to sourcing third-stream income from grants, endowments and alumni, and so on. At present, it is as if this fundraising, which is necessary to their institutional survival, has actually become the core business of the universities.

In South Africa, university budgets have been cut; funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has been cut; and research has been cut, which means that the core business of these institutions is being undermined. One consequence of the austerity is that the extended programmes which exist to support students in addressing barriers to learning are often the first to be cut. In this respect, the funding shortfalls effectively undermine efforts to address inequality.

One radical way of fostering change within higher education and becoming more responsive to the local environment would be to stop supporting the international system of university rankings. These rankings may be deployed to enable certain universities to fundraise but, other than that, they establish a zero-sum game, creating unhelpful competition rather than collaboration among the institutions.

Chetty: So that index is perhaps something that needs to be redefined?

Czerniewicz: There are two options. One is we get rid of the matrix and the measures altogether, to simply stop using them. The other is to completely change the standards – using other measures such as assessing performance in relation to the United Nations' (UN's) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); collaboration; making research available through open access; and publishing locally. By changing the criteria and the accompanying system of rewards and incentives, a larger change may be wrought.

Chetty: But then that would need to be some sort of global initiative with a lot of political buy-in.

Czerniewicz: If you have a dominant neoliberal world order, then you have to line up a whole lot of initiatives against neoliberalism and the universities' place in that. One of the things that universities need to be able to do, and which they certainly seem unable to do is to challenge the dominant order, the government, the multinationals, and so on. This requires collaboration within institutions, including among academic staff and non-academic staff, who remain worlds apart. The professional staff in the libraries and in the IT services are equipped with degrees and significant knowledge. But because academic and professional types of knowledge are different, these groups of staff can barely speak to each other; and there is no incentive for them to speak to each other, which does not make sense.

Transformation efforts also depend on greater collaboration and a shared infrastructure among universities. For instance, the Tertiary Education and Research Network of South Africa (TENET) provides bandwidth to the country's public universities. But shared infrastructure and resources could be offered in many more ways. Higher education institutions made a number of resources available to support online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. But why was this not done at the national level, instead of the wheel being reinvented multiple times at the institutional level?

Chetty: What would be your vision of the ideal university?

Czerniewicz: At the moment, I think that what is needed above all else is critical thinking, which is a perhaps an old-fashioned notion. In so many ways, we are living in an increasingly complex and polarised world. So, although graduates need to be prepared for the world by being taught particular practical and professional skills, such skills alone are insufficient. By contrast, an induction into critical thinking can equip students to manage the complexity facing them more effectively, asking difficult questions; recognising fake news, as well the value of new sources of information; looking past the way that everything is polarised; and interrogating authority.

In the field of technology, critical data literacies are crucial in addressing the implications of the digitisation of society. In this regard, I think that surveillance capitalism is one of the most burning issues facing society. Many people do not understand the implications of giving up their data to the big tech companies, which, insofar as they operate outside national rules and parameters and laws, may be viewed as actually running the world. So, students should be able to interrogate the ways in which the new technologies are being used and their impacts on human rights.

The pressure to equip students with the hard skills require to acquire paid work in an increasingly tough casualised gig economy is great and can numb educators to the need for critical thinking. But universities are obligated to help those lucky enough to become students who think critically.

The promotion of critical thinking is also fundamental to decolonisation efforts. The decolonisation project is fundamentally concerned with advancing the notion that there are multiple ways of knowing and thinking; and that scholars should be able to move between different epistemologies, between different ways of seeing. It places the emphasis on how knowledges shift and the importance of tolerating ambiguity. This is the kind of perspective with which students should be equipped, even in those disciplines which may be considered quite narrow, such as engineering and banking, given that the graduates as practitioners will have to face the increasingly complex dynamics that characterise the world of work today.

Chetty: At what stage should training around critical digital literacy be introduced into the education system? Where is the gap and how should it be plugged?

Czerniewicz: The gap exists before entering university, at school. But much of the problem here is that it cannot be assumed that teachers, let alone academics, are equipped to foster such critical digital literacy among their pupils. Many educators are unaware themselves because the system and dominant business models are designed to be obscure. Even at university, the rapid, complex datafication of society can defy the best efforts of discipline specialists to produce and share appropriate knowledges with their students.

In this context, I think there is a pressing need for massive professional development of teachers and of academics as educators. This could be similar to that which takes place in other parts of the world in the health or other professions, whereby these professionals are required continually to update their knowledge at particular points in their career order to continue practising in their sector. Similarly, educators could be required to attend various professional development activities in order to keep up to date and remain in post. Such continuous training should enable them not only to keep pace with the latest developments in their discipline or field, but also to gain an understanding of the emerging critical literacies that they may be expected to inculcate in their students. Because the scholarship of teaching and learning has shown that critical literacy skills cannot be taught separately – although many academics would prefer such an approach – they have to be integrated into the curriculum.

Chetty: Turning to the issue of inequitable access to digital infrastructure, do you have any recommendations on how this problem may be solved?

Czerniewicz: One of the problems with addressing the challenge of access is that the goal posts keep moving; so, you can never say it has been solved. At present, a large percentage of the African population have access to cellphones and cellphone coverage; and as the cost of data has dropped so internet access has become more affordable. In this regard, some of the previous access goals, which included the number of devices in use and the affordability of data, have been achieved. By last year's measures, there has been great improvement. But, the pivot to online, which accelerated under Covid, has shown that what was previously considered the absolute

minimum of data that should be made widely available is way behind what is required to enable comprehensive access, such as via synchronous streaming.

Meanwhile and notwithstanding the problem with benchmarking and setting goals for effective access, the establishment of a basic infrastructure for connectivity should be a state responsibility, just as the supply of water and electricity is. In this regard, the challenge is not so much the provision of devices; companies are prepared to give away devices and, in fact, more people have cellphones than they have toilets. The issue is connectivity and the differing costs of data, which can vary globally by as much as 30,000:1. So, this is an infrastructural concern which entails an allocation of responsibility for trying to bring down the cost of data. So, should the responsibility for enabling affordable access to sufficient data lie with the university, as is presently the case, or should the government adopt a larger role in this? Under Covid, one of the problems was that it lay with the university, which favoured the elite universities that were able to negotiate relatively favourable agreements directly with cellphone companies – or, at least it did, until the government eventually intervened.

In this regard, there is also the issue of the datafication and digitalisation of higher education, including in relation to the administrative, procurement and legal capacities required to manage a university. Higher education has become a huge market for private vendors offering the new technologies and related services – all of which has created new challenges for university administrators who are negotiating new terms of engagement; signing new kinds of contracts; and procuring new kinds of tools, without necessarily having the time or capacity to grapple with the full implications of what they are undertaking.

For example, there were a number of deals agreed quite recently between online programme management (OPM) companies and universities, under which the private contractors agreed to provide services to help the universities go online and fronted the initial costs on the basis that subsequent profits over something like a 7-year period would be split. However, a number of universities reportedly became quite unhappy with the terms of these agreements after the nature of their online engagement underwent a fundamental shift during the Covid-19 lockdown – nevertheless, it seemed they could not extricate themselves from these deals. In this case, digitalisation has given rise to previously non-existent concerns relating to legal fairness, indicating that new knowledge and skills may now be required to run a university effectively.

Chetty: Is there any value in trying to centralise the online educational and administrative platforms across the sector, or is there more value in each university having their own customisable system?

Czerniewicz: You can do both. You can acquire centralised systems that are customisable, which would enable the universities to leverage economies of scale and the power of joint bargaining. University libraries, for example, have engaged in joint bargaining with academic publishers. So, centralisation through joint purchasing but with room for localisation would produce benefits.

Chetty: Could such a system produce value for the sector as a whole beyond cost efficiencies?

Czerniewicz: Yes, such an approach could help to ensure that all universities can participate, which is important given that the digital economy is here to stay despite the drawbacks and the risks of engagement that it poses at present. In other words, it is worse to be excluded from this economy, rather than to participate in it, albeit in a critical fashion. In this respect, it is not as if universities with barriers to access are choosing to be off the grid, like hippies just wanting to go and live in the wild. So, the drive should be to foster inclusive systems and networks, such as TENET.

Chetty: So, what are the impediments to this approach?

Czerniewicz: There is a generalised preference for decentralisation in academia. Academics have an individualistic culture and like to invent their own practices, their own disciplines and their own usages. They do not like the introduction of that which is “not invented here” into their institutions. So, centralisation of certain university systems would require a cultural shift at a number of universities.

Chetty: There is also the issue that many of the new digital platforms are actually developed in the North. Is there not some value in South Africans and Africans developing their own platforms?

Czerniewicz: Yes, and there are some interesting examples of that happening at present, partly because of the unaffordability of the external offerings. For example, Amazon’s web service, which is increasingly popular, seems to offer an easy solution to the problem of moving a university’s information technology infrastructure into the cloud. But it costs a fortune and also provides Amazon with access to all of the participating universities’ metadata. So, there is an argument for taking the money that would be spent on this and rerouting it to other locally managed and owned service providers who have been developing a shared data infrastructure.

But the issue not just about a choice of administrative platforms. Returning to the question of the performance indicators according to which the international university rankings are assessed, there is a strong argument for promoting the publication of research on local platforms. As long as the system of academic rewards and promotion privileges research that has been published in privately owned Northern journals, there will be a serious disjuncture. In this regard, a drive to promote publishing on local platforms would produce significant benefits; although the system of academic rewards and incentives would have to be realigned accordingly so that scholars who accept the imperative of publishing locally are not disadvantaged in the present harsh academic job market.

Chetty: What other factors need to be addressed to promote a more inclusive higher education system?

Czerniewicz: The American philosopher and critical theorist Nancy Fraser defines social justice as being about parity of participation rather than access. She further identifies two kinds of remedies that may be produced to address the challenges that stand in the way of social justice. One kind she calls “affirmative” remedies, which may be taken to mean ameliorative action. The second kind she calls “transformative” remedies. Basically, affirmative remedies accept the present dysfunctional capitalist system as it stands but with a view to fixing or improving it. By contrast, transformative remedies seek to change the fundamentals of the system. This dichotomy offers a useful means of distinguishing between the different ways in which challenges may be addressed. One way is to make things more efficient or fairer; the other is to try and change the rules of the game itself. So, for example, a transformative approach to higher education would be to change the knowledge economy into a knowledge democracy, which would entail completely reorganising expenditure, resources, governance and the system of rewards. At present, such a transformation has not and may be unlikely to take place, but there is still a lot that can be done.

In this regard, it is also important to note that when considering how higher education, may change in relation to the issue of technology, the sector should not be viewed in isolation. A major problem at present is the fragmentation of the various policy and regulatory systems that impact on educational technology. In order to address effectively the inequalities in higher education insofar as they relate to technology, there should be coordination among planners; the communications sector; and those responsible for establishing the infrastructure, as well as with reference to poverty evaluations. The relevant ministries need to collaborate, which is a big ask. Such is the kind of action that is required at the institutional, national and global levels.

Chetty: So, do you favour an affirmative or a transformative approach?

Czerniewicz: I think you have to do both, although Nancy Fraser herself is very much in favour of the transformative approach. In terms of the big picture, I believe in a knowledge commons; I believe in the notion of a pluriversity, which is Achille Mbembe’s term – that is, I believe in multiple knowledges as co-existing; and I believe in governance structures that see knowledge as a shared good. But achievement of such a vision would entail such a dramatic shift that you also have to think in terms of iterations – particularly given that, historically, previous efforts at radical change have not always gone that well.

Meanwhile, in the context of the larger vision, I am quite disturbed by the extent of the recent and present privatisation of higher education and the way that neoliberal practices have penetrated the language of the institutions. Although South African universities do not talk about students as customers yet, as they do in England, they do talk about their business models. However, the fact is that, although universities should be efficient and sensible, they are not businesses and they do not report to shareholders. Rather their mission is to promote a social good and if they are reporting to anyone, it should be the public.

Chetty: In order to progress iteratively, we would need to set a target somewhere down the line and then identify smaller steps which will take us there. We would also need to ensure the buy-in of multiple stakeholders.

Czerniewicz: Yes, and then spend a lot of time on advocacy. It is also important to ensure that your agendas are not appropriated, as the concept and practice of open access publishing has been by big commercial publishers; or as the concept of social justice as embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, has been by many in marketing where really important justice issues have become commodified. In this regard, an effective way of determining the credibility of a particular campaign agenda is to follow the money and establish who is actually profiting.

Chetty: In terms of making an impact in the students' lives, you talked about how employment should perhaps not be the ultimate goal of higher education system and that there are other important agendas and principles. In this context, what recommendations would you make to help students improve their livelihoods?

Czerniewicz: It is not that employment should not be an end-goal, but rather that there is a prevalent, quite narrow view of how employability may be attained. My argument is that teaching people critical-thinking skills makes them more employable and more entrepreneurial. Such skills enable them to assess and take appropriate risks and start their own businesses. The aim should be to produce people who are both employable and employment-creating and who can make a significant contribution to society. At present, there is this dominant individualistic notion at universities and outside of what constitutes employability which ignores the larger contribution that a person may make to their society.

Chetty: I suppose students need to be inculcated with a greater sense of the value of the type of contribution they can make to society, while developing the cross-cutting perspective that will enable them to pivot and apply their skills in different contexts.

Czerniewicz: In seeking to produce beneficial change in the higher education sector, it is also important to acknowledge the need to forge context-specific solutions. One size does not fit all, as the failed effort to place the entire higher education sector online under the Covid-19 lockdown demonstrated. Planners need to make recommendations that can be adapted to suit local contexts.

Chetty: So, do you adopt a lowest-common-denominator approach? For example, by reverting to using the postal service to distribute documents to everyone, if there are students without proper digital access.

Czerniewicz: No, that is not a useful approach. That is the equivalent of saying that fairness means if some people have nothing, everyone should have nothing. Rather the principle should be to follow Karl Marx's dictum: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." What is required is a multi-modal, multi-strategy approach.

Chetty: But does that not introduce inequality into the system?

Czerniewicz: The key point is to address the specific context, as became clear so often during the Covid-19 lockdown. For example, one approach may be to decide that synchronised classes should be abandoned given the absence of sufficient universal connectivity and varying home circumstances. Alternatively, discussion among a particular post-graduate class may reveal that a number of other negotiated solutions can be found to address the shortfalls and meet the students' needs. To take another example, medical students returned to university earlier than other students as the lockdown eased as a matter of academic and social necessity. So, rather than adopting a lowest-common-denominator approach, planners should promote a number of generic principles which are generally agreed, such as "equity first", which should then be applied as circumstances dictate on the ground in different contexts.

In this regard, another principle that should guide universities is that any resources created with public money should be made available under open, creative commons licences – in other words, for the public good.

Chetty: So, adopting the "equity first" principle, if person A is equipped to go online and participate in a university webinar via Zoom but person B lacks those resources or lives in an environment that is not conducive to such engagement, would a space and the necessary tools be made available to person B to ensure that they enjoy parity of education?

Czerniewicz: During the pandemic, the issue of equity has been examined in a way that it was not previously. For example, it was the students with the most barriers to participation who were the first who were allowed and encouraged to return to campus. This was the general principled approach, which also entailed the development of specific criteria. However, it also became clear that there must be an element of judgment and trust in producing such criteria, given that there will always be additional circumstances that may not have been considered initially but which now should be – such as, in this case, a hostile domestic environment or local noise pollution and other health and safety concerns that may impede a student's learning. In this regard, bureaucratising such processes can be quite counter-productive, notwithstanding the initial good intentions behind the particular initiative.

Chetty: In seeking to redefine the university as you suggest there would likely be a lot of resistance. So, what sort of challenges would you foresee?

Czerniewicz: Managing change effectively entails rewarding the kinds of behaviours that you want to see. So, the present *ad hominem* criteria for promotion should be replaced by good-practice models that would build trust in the system. Such kinds of change may be a little pie-in-the-sky, given the precarious nature of higher education leadership. But such change is not impossible. Large-scale change can be implemented. Take social smoking for example – this was once considered absolutely normal, but now it is unacceptable.

Chetty: Are there any best practices or innovations that you would like to spotlight?

Czerniewicz: There are some positive examples of collaboration and of shared infrastructure. And of course, universities should deploy one of their core strengths, which is research, to reach a better understanding and develop solutions for some of the dilemmas posed by the drive for transformation.

