

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 Dr Nelson Masanche Nkhoma Interview conducted by Prof Catherine Odora Hoppers on 30 July 2021

Catherine Odora Hoppers: Could you briefly describe your relationship with higher education on this continent?

Nelson Masanche Nkhoma: I have been working in the higher education sector since 2015. In particular, I have been researching the contribution made by entrepreneurship education in the secondary sector to improving youth livelihoods and supporting community development.

Odora Hoppers: So, in your opinion, what are the purposes and roles of a university?

Nkhoma: The various stakeholders, such as students and the government, frame the role of the university in different ways in line with their expectations. As a scholar, my view is that, universities contribute to the generation of critical knowledge that shapes and permeates across different areas of society. In this regard, it is important that research is conducted at universities into what society wants higher education institutions to do and how should they do that.

Odora Hoppers: How relevant are the universities on the continent at present?

Nkhoma: Their contribution is somewhat mixed. Universities can play a significant role in developing skills among the youth and other members of society; in generating knowledge; and in creating a particular vision of society. In this regard, they are well-positioned compared with other external stakeholders or politicians whose efforts to shape the direction that African countries should take may be undermined by a relative lack of expertise and their own parochial interests, which may be corrupt.

Odora Hoppers: Turning to the future of the African university, what, in your experience, are the competing visions of the university?

Nkhoma: The university is becoming a major contributor to skills provision across the continent because of the massification of the sector both in terms of supply and demand, as primary and secondary education becomes more available. Society, firms and institutions are looking for people with high skills who can meet their needs and the demands of the current economy. All of which is pushing the university to become a universal provider of the required skills. However, the expectation that the university should merely be preparing people to acquire the skills to be able to function in different jobs – what I refer to as the “educationalisation” of the university – can be quite limiting. So, there is a different competing view that universities should be doing more than that and that, accordingly, more research-oriented universities should be established in Africa. So, there are two sets of expectations. One is that there is a need for universities to provide education and training; the other that universities should direct innovation, research and knowledge generation. So, there are these two competing views. Should the university merely prepare people, as high school does, to play different roles and shoulder different responsibilities in society? Or should it be an institution that focuses on sophisticated types of knowledge that can contribute to the social, economic and political development of the continent. In both cases, political and financial support would be required to implement the vision.

Odora Hoppers: What is your vision for the African university of the future?

Nkhoma: In order to have such a vision it is important to understand where one has come from and, in this respect, the weaknesses and limitations of the previous institutions.

Odora Hoppers: So, the university should look at itself, identify what is missing and stay away from its weaknesses in order to move forward?

Nkhoma: Yes, because you can't really have a strong understanding and operate in the future effectively unless you know what you are and what you are trying to do right now; and the challenge for African universities is that they don't understand what they are. The problem is exacerbated by the influence being wielded by people with money who have different agendas for what the university should try and achieve. Without a clear understanding of its own role and thus its future direction, the university is in danger of becoming just an instrument in other people's games. Similarly, the debate about decolonising the university which is taking place in South Africa is quite unclear about what the university is supposed to be decolonised from, although such clarity is necessary if the university is to move forward in relation to this idea.

Odora Hoppers: So, you have questions about what this effort to decolonise actually means.

Nkhoma: Yes. To take a parallel case, many people advise that artificial intelligence or the skills required for the fourth industrial revolution should be the focus in developing a vision of the university of the future – but with little regard for the context in which such a prioritisation may be implemented. So, for example, in Cape Town in South Africa, there is a great divide between the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the informal settlement at Khayelitsha. They comprise two quite different contexts. In this case, the discourse around creating a future university geared towards producing artificial intelligence or servicing the fourth industrial revolution is problematic given the university's current failure to address actual past and present developmental concerns effectively.

Odora Hoppers: So, what role do you see for indigenous knowledges?

Nkhoma: The question here concerns which knowledge is indigenous, and which is not given that all knowledge has a genesis. In this regard, it can be quite unhelpful to categorise certain knowledge as indigenous, or as externally produced, without paying attention to where and how it has come to be made. For example, much of the knowledge that underpins present agricultural research, including in relation to efforts to improve farming or combat climate change, has been there since time immemorial. But because of this divide between indigenous and non-indigenous, the knowledge that is being deployed is demarcated and may even be described as “primitive”, when, in fact, all knowledge is indigenous to a specific context and must be applied in relation to a particular context if it is to be meaningful.

Accordingly, I become concerned when someone says, “No. We should be bringing indigenous knowledge into the university” or “We should be bringing local knowledge into the university”. Such a discourse can exacerbate divisions within knowledge that should not be there and which, to a great extent, have disadvantaged the African continent. For example, colleagues in Europe tend to describe African knowledge or technologies as primitive although they themselves depend or have depended on this knowledge, expropriating it for themselves – and have then sought to export it back to where it originated as if it were not already there. It is a process that can give rise to the false notion that Africans need to integrate particular forms of knowledge produced in Europe into their education systems, when, in fact, they already hold this knowledge.

Odora Hoppers: That is why the South African policy on indigenous knowledge emphasises the public affirmation, recognition, development and protection of indigenous knowledge. What role do you think digital technologies should play in the curriculum and in learning?

Nkhoma: The problem has been that the institutions tend to be reactionary in their approach. So, for example, after the Covid-19 outbreak, the idea was floated that technology could be used as a way of dealing with the challenges of the pandemic – which led to the notion of people learning online and working from home being popularised. On one level, such an approach is understandable – human systems are adaptable and should change with the times. But on another level, the approach makes little sense given the fundamental role that technology plays in driving social change. In other words, the notion that new technology should be integrated into the education system should actually be a given, a no-brainer. It should be fundamental to how teaching, the curriculum, research and community engagement are conceptualised and undertaken at university. Although when referring to the term “technology”, I should note that I am referencing a larger conceptualisation than just artificial intelligence – that is, one which includes the different kinds of technology that have been used throughout time and which have shaped and continue to shape society.

Odora Hoppers: Can you give some examples of these technologies?

Nkhoma: Well, in this sense, I see language as a form of technology – a form of communication technology which has been operational throughout history, whether in oral, written or other forms. In other words, language may be viewed as a system or mechanism for communication. In this regard, and referencing the issue of indigenous knowledge once again, I do not believe there is any need to replace English as a medium of instruction, as a technology for communication, with isiZulu or Shona or Chichewa or Kiswahili. In my mind, English is an inductor language. It

changes. It adopts. It is not a stagnant language. Everyone can contribute to it, and it is available to be used as may be seen fit within African institutions.

So, in considering the role and place of different types of technologies within the present and future university, I would not support the idea that there is inherent virtue in abolishing one type of technology and replacing it with another. I think that such a notion of decolonising the university is problematic and stems from a failure to understand the university's trajectory through time.

Odora Hoppers: So, are you saying that there is no need to change anything, that you are supporting the status quo?

Nkhoma: No, I am not necessarily advocating remaining within the status quo. Rather my understanding is that the higher education systems and institutions under consideration change but only with great delay – and efforts to transform them should be implemented accordingly. So, I am wary of people who use cheap rhetoric, which is quite common now. For example, the debate around decolonisation taking place in South African universities feels somewhat detached from the discourse among other higher education institutions in Africa, perhaps because the country is a relatively remote part of the continent. In South Africa, this debate around decolonisation started with the national #FeesMustFall student protest movement in 2015, or perhaps in 1994 when South Africa ended Apartheid; but elsewhere this debate has been underway for a long time. The point being that the debate should take place within a framework in which it is understood that everyone is contributing to a universal set of knowledge. No one can really lay claim to be the singular owner of that knowledge, rather everyone should contribute and claim ownership of the knowledge. As I noted in relation to the issue of the English language as a technology for communication within the university in Africa, there is no need for scholars to divorce themselves from this language simply because it is called English and because of some unfounded assumption that the English in Britain are the ones who own the language. The reality is that English has been adopted by many systems and can be used as one's own language on the basis that it is a joint creation.

This is the kind of philosophy of change that should be being driven at universities and that should be the goal of these institutions.

Odora Hoppers: How can African universities become more agile in responding to changes taking place in the world and in responding to global problems?

Nkhoma: A change in approach is required. Many of those in influential positions adopt a deficit approach, perhaps as a means of raising money. When describing the character of the higher education system in Africa, they place the emphasis on what the universities lack, for example, in relation to their infrastructure. Then there is a call that help is needed to be able to achieve A, B or C. However, a more effective approach would be to frame the positive contributions that African institutions are making in various sectors of society; and to deploy that outlook as a platform for solving problems; creating new knowledge; and developing innovations for dealing with different situations. This should be the approach not just here in Africa, but elsewhere.

For example, in relation to Covid-19, it was quite commonly accepted that the necessary vaccines would not be produced in Africa. So, African countries would have to ask for vaccines from Europe

and elsewhere. In this kind of context, the question then is: How can universities be more agile in dealing with such situations? And the answer is: By owning some of these problems; focusing on the things that can be done well; and using the knowledge that is produced as a result to leverage solutions to address the different types of challenges that are being faced. Because there is nothing that cannot be done in Africa; or that is not being done now; or that has not been done before. So, the key is to shift the way in which Africa's problems are being considered, and the way in which the solutions to those problems are being considered.

Odora Hoppers: I'm happy to tell you that Uganda right now has produced a Covid treatment. One drug developed by a team of scientists at Mbarara University of Science and Technology in the country's southwest has been licensed already; and Gulu University in northern Uganda has been authorised to manufacture a second drug for Covid.

Nkhoma: That's exactly the type of knowing that should be promoted. But how many times is such knowledge broadcast by newspaper headlines or featured in the journals of research and knowledge published in Africa? This is where the failure lies. No-one is going to beat the African drum if the Africans themselves can't do it.

Odora Hoppers: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Nkhoma: There's a saying that my grandfather taught me which I find valuable, which translates literally as: Being smart doesn't catch fish; what catches fish is the hook. For me, the lesson of this is that there is little point in pretending to be smart about the pressing problems being faced; rather the focus should be on the materials and the methods that may be used to deal with these challenges. What hook do we have to deal with the pandemic? What hook do we have to create a university of the present that can spearhead development into the future? What hook do we have to create the knowledge that is necessary to change the systems in Africa so that the continent can move from dependency to actual independence? And knowledge must be the starting point of this endeavour in order to produce a more creative way of thinking about the kinds of solutions that may be produced to address the needs of communities.