Interview with Dr Doyin Atewologun
Interview conducted by Prof David Everatt on 12 July 2021

David Everatt: Could you describe your relationship with higher education in Africa?

Doyin Atewologun: I have never been on the receiving end of higher education in Africa, so I feel somewhat unqualified to comment on that. On the other hand, I have had the privilege of being affiliated with a number of higher education institutions in different parts of Africa, so I can comment from a provider perspective rather than a lived-experience perspective.

Everatt: What do you think are the roles and purposes of the university in Africa today?

Atewologun: In terms of knowledge generation and transmission, there are two inter-related issues. One concerns assumptions around the kinds of knowledge that are considered appropriate and are valued, and the source of these assumptions. The second concerns the university's responsibility to contribute to building the next generation and equipping young people to live in multiple worlds, which is the reality that they face. So, for example, in relation to my own field, which is management research and organisational behaviour, students may be taught using the Harvard approach to teaching management theory which would enable them to navigate that knowledge space with confidence; but there is also another parallel approach to understanding business, society, the economy, finance and strategy which considers them from the perspective of the local context and thus equips students to navigate this knowledge space as well.

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Everatt: In the context of the economic and governance challenges that many African countries face, do you think the continent's universities are ready to approach the issues of knowledge generation and transmission in this way?

Atewologun: There is a wide of range of African universities, so the notion that there is such a thing as "the African university" which can be identified by a number of salient features may be ill-founded. Nevertheless, in the context of the government and governance challenges that higher education institutions face, it would seem that private universities are plugging this gap, indicating that it is possible to find a way through.

Everatt: There seem to be quite a few competing visions of what the African university should be. At some institutions, the emphasis is on preparing students for the workplace, including through management and professional training. At others, the emphasis is on letting youngsters find themselves? What is your view of such visions?

Atewologun: Both visions are important and have been aspects of advanced education across the world. So, for example, in the United Kingdom (UK), there was historically a separation between institutions providing more applied, technical training at an advanced level and those offering a loftier, theoretical kind of education – although that is possibly a false dichotomy, particularly given the way in which these distinctions collapsed in the UK from 1992 when the polytechnics became universities. And also given that the so-called research universities also offer training in applied knowledge. For example, students can obtain a master's in business administration (MBA) at Oxford University.

Similarly, universities in Africa could do both. While I understand that there may well be good reason to prioritise the more practical or applied or technical skills, there is always space for different ways of engaging with and producing knowledge. After all, where else apart from university can one learn philosophy?

Everatt: After the polytechnics became universities in England, many of them did really well.

Atewologun: Absolutely. In particular, they have established a reputation for being student-centred in their teaching and for focussing on the student experience, which has raised the question: Why are the more traditional universities not performing better in terms of the student experience?

Everatt: Part of the problem may be that such universities focus on chasing high international rankings rather than placing the student experience at the core of their mission.

Atewologun: This is a dilemma faced by the more traditional universities in a system which rewards and reinforces other aspects of the academic project instead of student-centred work. The challenge then is to prioritise such work while also playing the global game, which may not be that possible.

Everatt: At present, there are still students in South Africa who sleep in the library or the laboratory because they have nowhere else to go, because the small grant they receive from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is sent home to sustain unemployed, hungry parents. This is an issue which must be addressed. Students must be provided with appropriate shelter and fed so that they can learn. So, the question is: How to address these issues of access, funding, support and the transition into livelihoods?

Atewologun: This issue of transition to livelihoods is a great concern in many African countries compared with elsewhere. For example, the communities which have historically been attracted to Oxford have taken it for granted that they will be able to access resources and occupy certain positions within society. In this context, access to livelihoods has not been prioritised as a goal at the more traditional universities.

In relation to funding and access, it is in a nation's interests that its most talented young people, wherever they may be found, are provided with the best available educational opportunities and experience. Every effort to overcome the obstacles to such access, whether these are financial or based on disability or gender, needs to be taken.

In relation to the African university, it will be critical to ensure that there are funding opportunities to enable access to higher education for the widest possible pool of talent and to ensure that people who are born into particular social economic circumstances are not prevented from contributing to knowledge and society.

Everatt: Do you see a place for indigenous knowledge systems in the African university?

Atewologun: Yes, including outside Africa where understanding of the forms of knowledge produced in indigenous communities in Northern America, the Pacific islands, Australia and New Zealand should be promoted. It is important to value the different forms of knowledge, including the particular kinds of knowledge that are produced where people are and where they come from. In the context of the dominance of a particular form of knowledge – that is, the knowledge being produced in Europe, North America and Australia – the challenge is to construct a duality of knowledges; and equip students with the skills to navigate the dominant model, as well as an understanding of the value that may be provided by indigenous models and the alternative views that they present. That is the duality that African students and the African university should address.

In this regard and in my work with organisations around the issue of diversity, I am often asked whether people should be equipped with the skills required to navigate the system or those required to beat the system. And I think the answer is, both, Beating the system, disrupting the system, up-ending the system – this all takes time. Meanwhile, there is the drive to, say, become a senior manager within the same system in the next three years.

Everatt: In South Africa at the moment there is quite a strong movement, particularly among some of the more radical students, which posits the notion a pre-colonial past to which everyone should return, an era when African values were understood and when people interacted without the interference of capitalism. The call is to throw off all the modern shackles, including those of technology, and go back to this idyllic past.

Atewologun: I understand that for the purposes of illustration, you are describing an extreme end of the spectrum. Rather I would propose a position closer to the middle of the spectrum – a position where forms of indigenous production and indigenous knowledge are embraced and celebrated alongside deployment of some of the other key tools.

For example, in my work in the area of leadership, up until very recently, about 90% of the knowledge produced on the topic was based on English texts written by white, predominantly American men. However, their ideas can be challenged, particularly through reference to more indigenous forms and ideas of leadership as developed in local communities. For example, the shape of indigenous infrastructures and the less hierarchal and more circular ways in which people would organise themselves physically at gatherings may usefully inform the ways in which modern team meetings could be held. Similarly, the technologies and tools at the centre of the enactment of traditional leadership may have contemporary applications. So, there is a lot space for creativity and innovation; and although it is harder work to mix paradigms, there should be an intentional drive to promote such efforts.

Everatt: Under the concept of transformative African leadership, which is gaining currency, this idea of holding all these different realities at once is crucial. Meanwhile, in relation to the value of technology, I think a progressive approach is to accord it a more supportive role rather than fetishising it as the solution to Africa's problems. Accordingly, the ideal African university may be framed as one that is aware of its pre-colonial origins but can operate in the post-colonial environment and addresses its students' needs, whether these be psychosocial, or related to access, finances, technology, or whatever.

So, my question in relation to the quest for such an institution is: Who do you think would oppose the implementation of such an ideal and instead argue that the present system of Oxfords and polytechnics works just fine? Who you think the antagonist would be?

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Atewologun: What comes to mind is those universities that have modelled themselves as Western higher education institutions, including in relation to their curricula and faculty design. The aim being to attract African students who lack the money and/or time to go elsewhere but are looking for a kind of Western educational experience in Africa. Given that the appeal of such institutions is in their capacity to duplicate existing educational models, it is in their interests to continue to do so.

Accordingly, the establishment of a new kind of African university embracing duality would be seen as a challenge to the position of such institutions which have achieved some success in selling a non-local experience locally.

Everatt: This argument seems particularly valid in the context of South Africa, where, a number of private universities and colleges emerged even as the #FeesMustFall student movement erupted nationwide in 2015 in response to rising fees. Although of dubious quality in some cases, these institutions gained popularity among parents who, for example, no longer wished to send their children to the University of the Witwatersrand as long as there were police on the campus.

How can African universities become more agile in response to contemporary challenges, including in terms of accessing funding; being creative; thinking a step ahead; and clearly identifying their advantages and playing to them?

Atewologun: I think agility is a challenge for universities everywhere, regardless of their geographical location, because they can be such complex structures embodying a range of disciplines, each with their own philosophy and set of paradigms. There are even universities that operate as a global brand and so are required to respond to or address needs across the world. In this context, I am not sure that agility is a quality that I readily associate with universities. However, agility may perhaps be fostered through a form of devolution – something that departments or faculties, rather than whole universities, may achieve.

Everatt: While individual institutes can create agility they also entail bureaucracy. On a separate topic, is there an innovation or a best practice that you think may be instructive for African universities?

Atewologun: Well, this is not an innovation, but I would say that it is important to address the issue of funding, including by asking those alumni who can afford it to give back. In general, there is a need to find a way to expand the number of beneficiaries of higher education in countries across Africa. At present, so much talent is being wasted. For example, there are over 200 million people in Nigeria and every generation will have a number of very talented people and geniuses not just in the field of commerce and entrepreneurship, but across the board. So, the numbers are in Nigeria's favour. However, the systems and structures are not in place to identify, attract and nurture this talent, which means the country is losing out.

Everatt: There was a television advert produced in the early 1990s in South Africa before the introduction of democracy in which then Archbishop Desmond Tutu walked through a room of orphan babies, pointing to them and saying, "This child could have been a surgeon", and "This child could have been a nuclear physicist", and so on. The point being that instead, these children were being cast away. And now, 30 years later, you are making the same point. Clearly, the system is not getting it right for enough people, which puts me in mind of a YouTube account of a Nigerian youth brought up in a slum who, at the age of 17, collected parts from the local dumps and made a 3D printer from them.

Atewologun: Non-traditional forms of learning need to be recognised and harnessed. In this regard, there is a need to look beyond the traditional university system because it may well be that the future of the African university is not on campus, or at least not on the campus as this has been traditionally conceived; it may be that the future of the African university is not focussed only on 17- and 18-year-olds; and it may be that the future of the African university is on YouTube or is expressed through other technologies. In other words, there is always a need to return to the foundational questions, such as: What is the educational objective? and What is the best way of achieving this? which may entail a radical break with the way things are being done at present.