Interview with Prof Cheryl de la Rey
Interview conducted by Prof Crain Soudien on 2 June 2021

Crain Soudien: How would you describe your own position in relation to the higher education landscape in Africa?

Cheryl de la Rey: Straight after school I went into a South African university. That was during the 1980s under apartheid. So, my entry into university life was framed by having to apply for a permit to go to the university closest to my home in Durban. In this way, my first knowledge of a university, which was as a student, was framed by the context of apartheid – that is, inequality from the very first step, from my entry into university and even prior to my entry. The experience of inequality shaped my world view at that point in time.

Subsequently, my intellectual socialisation as a student and then later as an academic from the junior ranks right through to the professorship happened within an African context. So, although I now work as the head of a New Zealand institution,[1] my thinking has been shaped by that long experience in an African context.

Soudien: What is your view of the university generically?

De la Rey: I have always reflected on the changing nature of the university and particularly the changing nature of what is seen as a good university. Looking back to

---

[1] Professor Cheryl de la Rey was appointed as vice-chancellor of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand in 2019.

the turn of the 20th century following the rise of the notion of the research university, there was a debate in the English-speaking world about whether universities should be places for educating and training professionals such as medical doctors and engineers and so on, or whether they should primarily be places for intellectual thought. Then there was the establishment of the land grant universities in the United States which were conceived has having a relationship to their local communities.

Subsequently, after the Second World War, there was great demystification of university education and the rise of new universities. There was also a functional shift as those institutions which had been clearly demarcated as providing vocational qualifications began offering degrees as traditional universities did. So, the notion of universities as engines for producing the skills required by the economy gained currency; as did the idea that universities had a role to play in relation to broader, contemporary social issues. In this context, I became involved in the growing movement around the notion of the "engaged" university in the 1990s – the idea being that universities had a mission beyond the production of graduates and research as institutions that engaged with their societies. Then, in the 21st century, there has been increasing debate about globalisation and internationalisation and what that means for universities.

In my work, I have continually returned to the idea of the changing nature of the university and how it relates to its society, including local communities, government, the state and the world in general. As an academic, I have continually reflected on my responsibility in relation to the mission and intellectual project of the university as a pillar of society – which in my own scholarship has taken the form of a concern with the lines of inequality and the various ways in which these are expressed. And I continue to think about the concept of public good and what that means for the university within a context that keeps changing.

Soudien: So, how would you describe where African universities are in relation to the question of the public good, that is, the value-added contribution that they are, or should be, making?

De la Rey: I see African universities as a critical component of the transformation of African societies – and I use that word "transformation" in the broadest sense to encompass transforming knowledge; transforming identity; transforming or making an impact on systems of governance and how governance is conceived; and transforming individual lives, including through the ripple effect created by each graduate whom the universities educate.

One aspect of this would be the ways in which the knowledge project at African universities may be transformed in the post-colonial period. For example, in relation to my own discipline of psychology, the knowledge space has framed African peoples as "the other"; but now African universities have the opportunity to shift the power dynamics of knowledges in their various manifestations.

Soudien: In your view, how well have the universities done in fulfilling that mission?

De la Rey: I think it has been quite challenging. There have been a host of African academics who have made significant contributions. For example, as a student, I was privileged to have benefitted from African academics, such as Chabani Manganyi, who shifted my thinking. I anticipate that the number of such academics will grow.

However, African universities have faced a number of challenges including concerning the resources available to meet the public-good expectations; and also concerning their relationships with various governments over time which have affected the extent of their institutional autonomy, as well as the extent of the resources made available to them by the state. For example, African academics who have been too critical have been sanctioned in a number of ways.

At the same time, looking at African universities as a cohort, there appears to have been a growing commitment to collaboration and an understanding that they have the power to transform African societies. Certainly, there has been a growth in networks among African universities, many of which have been effective.

Soudien: You have mentioned resourcing and autonomy as issues which have had an impact on African universities. What other obstacles stand in the path of their development?

De la Rey: There is the issue of attracting and retaining academics. There is global competition for talent. So, many academics are pursued by, and attracted to, competing institutions outside Africa, which poses a significant challenge.

There is also the issue of post-graduate programmes and doctoral opportunities for African students, which relates not only to the availability of scholarships but also whether the infrastructure is in place to enable doctoral students (with their supervisors) to produce the best work that they can and undertake the kind of work that is best done within an African context.

In this regard, one useful approach may be to be less traditional about how curricula are structured. Doctoral degrees traditionally entail greater specialisation, and there is a place for that; but there may also be a place for another kind of doctoral programme, one in which the requirement for original thought and research is married to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that prepare the doctoral student for a non-academic career. This idea occurred to me in the context of criticism of South African officials, a significant number of whom were doctoral graduates. In this regard, it seemed that their university studies had not prepared for the career paths that they had subsequently taken.

So, African universities can and should push boundaries by rethinking the received wisdom on curricula and how these are structured.

Soudien: What is your view on the issues of access, funding, and support for student transitions to the workplace?

De la Rey: Access is a broad concept which entails more than consideration of academic merit, however that may be defined. It also relates to the issue of first-generation students and how they find themselves in a position to go to university, as well as the ways in which universities are articulated with other parts of the education system and how the relationship between universities and the rest of the education system can be transformed.

Funding is a concern for the individual student; but also relates to the need to maintain higher education infrastructure at a level that fosters the kind of academic pursuit required by African societies. This infrastructure includes teaching facilities; research capabilities; libraries; the necessary licensing fees; and a whole host of resources.

The issue of transitions to livelihoods relates to the need to rethink or think more broadly about the university curriculum, which I have mentioned. In this respect, it has been acknowledged that work-integrated or experiential learning can take place in a number of different ways. Furthermore, there should be a greater focus on introducing entrepreneurship at an earlier stage in the university system as an alternative to viewing the transition into work after graduation only in terms of organised employment opportunities.

More broadly, the goal of fostering transitions to livelihoods should be viewed as an aspect of universities' civic function – that is, their responsibility to educate and develop graduates who have a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility beyond themselves as individuals. This is particularly important given the focus on the acquisition of material wealth at the individual level in African societies.

Soudien: Are there any insights from your experience in New Zealand that may be applied in the African context?

De la Rey: There is a strong sense of volunteerism embedded in the society in the city of Christchurch in New Zealand and within the student community at the University of Canterbury. For example, following a heavy rainfall which caused considerable flooding in nearby farming areas, threatening livestock and washing away bridges, a group of students volunteered and went onto local farms to help clear the debris. Meanwhile, many of those working for the local fire services are volunteers; and many of my colleagues volunteer in one way or another. Such behaviour is normative.

To offer another example of student volunteerism: during the lockdown that was imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, a group of students obtained permission to go shopping for people who could not do their own shopping; and a protocol was established for how they could do this, which included measures such as doorstep delivery. The students undertook this project for no reward and with no prospect of recognition.

In South Africa, there is organised charitable work by students, but it has not been the case that the general student population and staff volunteer spontaneously on a regular basis. So, the ethos of volunteerism that I have witnessed at the University of Canterbury is something from which students in Africa could learn and which should be encouraged at African universities.

Soudien: What is your view on the importance of indigenous knowledge, languages and local cultures; and the importance of digital technologies, in relation to higher education?

De la Rey: As an academic, I was concerned from the outset with how the knowledge in my discipline was framed, including whose perspective was privileged in the knowledge that I learned as a student; and, accordingly, I have reflected on my own responsibility as a scholar in seeking to shift those perspectives in the bodies of knowledge in which I have engaged.

In this regard, indigenous knowledges present a range of perspectives on daily life and the world. For example, a Western conceptualisation of time frames it as future-oriented and as a scarce resource that is always running out. But another way of looking at time would be to think about the past and one's ancestry. In this sense, the topic of indigenous knowledge raises fundamental questions about how normative understandings of what constitutes knowledge are shaped and how knowledge itself is constituted. Accordingly, this issue has played a part in framing the project of decolonialisation at African universities, promoting the idea that these institutions have a responsibility to nurture African intellectuals and to reflect on what the knowledge project means for the African university.

The topic of indigenous knowledge also focuses on the issue of language as a fundamental aspect of identity. The issue of languages often becomes a financial one for universities, with programmes getting cut if the numbers of those seeking to join them are too low. However, this concern may be addressed by university leaderships through cross-subsidisation within an institution if it is large enough – and if it is not, through collaboration and cooperation with other universities, particularly if they are nearby. In other words, instead of such programmes being cut, the universities could consider pooling and sharing resources to provide the necessary support.

As for the issue of digital technologies, these have already become a way of life on the continent and have been embraced by African universities. In this regard, it is interesting how quickly many people adapted to the hand-held smart phone as their first digital device, rather than transitioning from laptop to phone. Accordingly, smart phones represent potentially the most important device for learning given their technical capabilities and wide usage, even though the educational software is not there yet.

African young people, like young people all over the world, have embraced these technologies and are learning in completely different ways to how my generation learned. For example, talk-to-text software enables a way of learning that was not previously available: before they have learnt to write, children can take a mobile device, talk into it, see their message being written and then send it. So, as a university leader, I am excited by the possibilities of new technologies and how they may be embraced as tools for learning and for widening access to the university experiences, rather than merely as devices for entertainment and recreation.

Soudien: You founded the Future Africa Institute. From this experience and your experience in general with African universities, are there any particular examples of innovation that you would like to highlight?

De la Rey: Future Africa was conceptualised in response to the traditional ways in which African universities are structured by department. It was conceived as a space for trans-disciplinary work, including at the doctoral level, where the intractable, so-called "wicked" problems faced by Africa in its drive to achieve sustainable development could be addressed.

More generally in relation to fostering innovation, it is crucial that the new technologies are deployed as effectively as possible in support of curricula. The development of these technologies is already an area in which Africa has some expertise. Kenya in particular is renowned for innovating in terms of pioneering smart payments via mobile phones. So, there is a history of embracing technologies on the continent. However, one of the constraints has been the restricted access to bandwidth and the relatively high costs of connectivity in many parts of Africa. So, there is a digital divide in terms of infrastructural inequalities and cost which must be addressed in order to enable greater levels of innovation.

Ironically, crises can provide opportunities for innovation as those involved seek new solutions to their situations. For example, the move to online teaching was sparked most recently by the lockdowns imposed in response to Covid-19 and also a few years ago by the nationwide student protests at universities in South Africa. In this regard, there is a history of resilience and innovation in times of crisis across the African university system.

Soudien: Could you talk about the issue of universities becoming more agile?

De la Rey: One of my frustrations has often been how slowly things get done in a university, except in moments of crisis when suddenly things get done quite quickly. So, I think there is a need for more agility and responsiveness. On the other hand, there is an institutional strength in continuity which has enabled universities to survive regime change, civil war, dictatorships and different political eras. In this regard, although agility is a virtue it should not entail simply bending in the wind and abandoning the resilience that has helped universities to prevail despite changes in

funding regimes and shifting global trends. Good universities are both responsive and enduring.

Soudien: Beyond South Africa, which universities offer an example of resilience and relevance?

De la Rey: Makerere University is an institution that has survived significant changes and produced some great academics and students. The University of Ghana at Legon also has produced some outstanding thought-leaders including in the fields of women's studies and gender studies.