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 Mr Ndungu Kahihu
Interview conducted by Dr Alude Mahali on 19 May 2021

Alude Mahali: At present, you are an executive director of the CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute. But could you tell me more broadly about your relationship with higher education in Africa?

Ndungu Kahihu: I have worked across the continent, including in north, eastern and west Africa. I come from a professional education background. My first job was as an untrained teacher before I went to college to obtain a degree and then became a high school teacher. After that I joined an organisation which undertook leadership training. Subsequently, I worked for the Kenya Scout Association, where I was responsible for training, curriculum design and programme development. I then moved to international development, working for an organisation called Plan International, where I was involved in activities related to learning; gender equality; and the development and delivery of skills for employability. At present, I lead an organisation that offers education solutions for vulnerable young people, providing them with skills so that they can secure opportunities to earn a living.

Mahali: You have helped young people secure further learning. Was this in the tertiary sector? And, if so, what services and resources did you provide?

Kahihu: The organisation I lead aims to reach the most marginalised youth; and that includes young people who drop out before they complete higher education and those who drop out after completing their secondary education. The organisation provides a package of three pathways. The first offers the possibility of earning a living through a

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job; the second offers the possibility of earning a living through self-employment, including by starting a business and becoming an entrepreneur; the third provides a transition to further learning so that the young people who graduate from the institute can realise their career and life aspirations. Under this third pathway, the students are supported so that they can enter tertiary institutions, such as Kenya's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, as well as universities, and gain valuable skills and formal certificates and diplomas.

Mahali: In your opinion, what broadly is the purpose and role of the university?

Kahihu: I would say that universities are supposed to be thought leaders for their nations. They should be places that try to be ahead of the problems that the country is facing and find solutions before these problems become crises. Unfortunately, this is not a role that universities are playing at present because instead they focus on being teaching institutions, although teaching is important. I remember one of my first lecturers at university saying: "You did not come here to learn, you came here to generate knowledge for society." I think that is what universities should be doing, especially in Africa. However, notwithstanding the expense of maintaining these higher education institutions, this is not a role that they have been playing. Instead, there has been a reliance on foreigners to come and try to help find the solutions to the problems.

Mahali: So, how relevant are the universities in Africa to the economic and governance issues being faced on the continent?

Kahihu: They need to step up; these big institutions must be more than just schools. They need to tap the great talent among their students and elsewhere among the youth in order to address and solve the problems faced by African countries. These include the existential problem of youth unemployment, which was a cause of the Arab Spring protests and uprising that erupted in the early 2010s. The existence of CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute testifies to the failure of universities to address this problem.

Mahali: So, in your experience, what are some of the competing visions for the university?

Kahihu: Universities provide the training and experience required to harness human talent and provide national societies with the skilled workforce they require. They also operate as thought leaders, conducting research that addresses and finds solutions to the problems faced by society. They also act as a focus for young people's aspirations, assuring them of higher statues if they put in the extra work required to attend university, which produces benefits for society as a whole.

Mahali: Looking ahead, how would you describe your own vision for the African university of the future?

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Kahihu: If I had my way, I would force all universities in Africa to spend 50% of their time on research and implementation of research that involves community members, and helps them to solve their problems or helps them to harness their own knowledge to solve those problems. In this respect, universities should not operate as ivory towers isolated from society, but should act as leaders in their local communities, encouraging local people to walk in and ask questions. It is time that people demand some return on the value and esteem attributed to universities, which enjoy a privileged position in their societies.

Mahali: In this vision of the ideal African university of the future, how would you address issues of access?

Kahihu: A first step would be to break down the walls, both physical and imagined, that separate these institutions from local communities – the idea that common villagers should not dare to approach highly educated people at university. A second would be to ensure that higher education institutions are equipped with the appropriate electronic technology, media and resources in support of this open-university concept.

Mahali: What about funding? How would you address the issue of financing such universities?

Kahihu: A university that plays this kind of open role and offers itself as a provider of solutions to the problems faced by society will not struggle for funding. For example, employers have said that they are quite willing to pay for the services provided by CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute, which is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) connecting employers to young people and designing and offering training in response to the needs of employers. Over the past 10 years, employers have expressed their appreciation of the value of these services, saying: "We hire people from universities and colleges who are half-baked and we have to train them, which costs a lot of money. If the university assured us that their students would be trained to our requirements, we would pay." In a similar vein, what is to prevent universities from figuring out a cure for malaria, which kills thousands of children every year, and for which they would certainly receive funding?

I know funding will always be an issue for universities, but I do not think that it is the biggest problem that they face right now.

Mahali: What is the biggest problem that universities face?

Kahihu: It is relevance, particularly given the way in which governments fund these institutions in the belief that they can offer solutions, even as they do not. Over the past 25 years, there has been significant investment in universal basic education and in tertiary education in order to pave the way for the next generation of pupils emerging from the primary and secondary sectors. However, it soon became apparent that the

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universities were unprepared when the new wave of pupils graduating from the secondary sector finally arrived. Their training capacity was inadequate. One response to this in Kenya has been that, despite the urgings of their parents, an increasing number of pupils have foregone university education for a place at one of the country's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges as they seek to acquire skills that will enable them to earn a living more immediately. For example, it was recently announced, to the apparent surprise of the relevant government minister, that about 6,000 Kenyan pupils had chosen to attend TVET institutions instead of university. This indicates that universities are failing to meet society's expectation of them.

Mahali: In this ideal university that you imagine, how would you deal with the issues of support, mentorship and sensitivity to the range of social identities among young people in Africa?

Kahihu: CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute provides a programme that helps young people transition from a state of hopelessness to one of hope by offering them: technical skills that enable them to secure a living for themselves; basic entrepreneurship skills in case they want to monetise their talent; and a package of life skills that prepare them for life and the world of work.

The students' positive response to the life-skills training was originally attributed to the effects of their deprived backgrounds. But it was subsequently realised that the kind of support offered by this training is of value to any young person. The programme now includes mentorship. Every young person who attends the training centre is allocated somebody who will hold their hand until they reach the point when they can work on their own. This aspect of the training has been effective, which begs the question: Why do the universities, which produced the theory on which this mentorship model is based, fail to offer such support themselves?

Mahali: How will this university that you imagine deal with transitions into livelihoods?

Kahihu: Most universities work in silos as self-enclosed entities teaching and trying to prepare young people for the outside world in the hope that the world of work will accept them. But it has been shown that this ivory-tower approach does not work. By contrast, CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute has adopted a model of creating room for employers in the classroom. It has structured opportunities and activities with the goal of involving employers in designing and delivering the curriculum; and in evaluating the learning on offer, as well as the students themselves when they undertake internships or work experience or are employed.

The model proved effective from the outset, nine years ago, when employers welcomed the approach as a first of its kind, describing how they had never been actively engaged in this way, having previously only been approached by institutions once the students had finished their studies to place these graduates in jobs or internships.

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In other words, universities can quite easily become relevant by focussing on the needs of industry, the labour market and national development as they seek to prepare young people who are employable. Some universities do this with good results – although unfortunately, with the exception of a few South African institutions, most of these universities are in Europe or North America. For example, the needs of industry are prioritised in Germany where many universities offer dual studies which combine practical work placements with academic training. This is an approach that could easily be adopted in Africa.

Mahali: Can you describe how the CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute implements its model in practice?

Kahihu: The institute has developed a nine-step linear model for basic employability skills training. The first step is to undertake a market assessment to establish the extent and kind of livelihood opportunities in the various economic sectors. Given the organisation's limited resources, such assessments are quite small-scale and localised, although the institute is set to undertake broader assessments by leveraging larger labour-market data sets.

Having undertaken the initial assessment, the various sectors are rated according to their employment potential rather than according to how attractive they may be to young people. The institute then engages industry stakeholders in the target sectors, asking them: "Whom do you hire?" These firms then tend to share their frustrations about the lack of appropriate skills among the labour force, to which the institute responds: "If we train people with these skills would you hire them?" and also "Would you be prepared to be part of such a training programme?" Many employers are sceptical at first, but their engagement and cooperation is a necessary step in the process. Only once this is forthcoming, can an appropriate training curriculum be designed.

The next step, before the specific technical training or curriculum is delivered, is that the students must undertake an induction programme which introduces a number of life skills. The aim of this module is to help the students identify their goals and a life path, and to start preparing a plan to achieve these goals and follow this path.

Then the technical training starts in the classroom and at workplaces. This training is delivered by the institute's own staff as well as by industry stakeholders who may come to the classroom or take the students to their firms. For example, if the training relates to the hospitality industry, then hotel staff may come and talk about what happens in their sector and the institute will also organise for the students to go and learn *in situ* at hotels.

The final module provides work readiness training. In other words, it seeks to prepare students for the world of work in terms of, for example, how to write a resume; how to dress properly; how to address an interview; and how to solve conflicts in the workplace. This module is delivered almost entirely by industry stakeholders who present students

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with a clear idea of what they can expect and what will be expected of them in the workplace. The module also includes input from human resources staff, who come and conduct mock interviews with the students and provide them with feedback on their performance.

This simple model has enabled the institute to achieve a high transition from learning to earning among its students of almost 80%. A similar linear-model is deployed by Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator in South Africa. So, if such relatively poorly resourced NGOs have shown that the approach works, then relatively well-funded universities with their greater access to technical and intellectual resources should also be able to adopt the approach to great effect.

Mahali: What place do indigenous knowledges have in your vision of the university of the future?

Kahihu: Most indigenous knowledge on the continent has been lost over the past 50 to 70 years, as Africans have abandoned their origins and rushed to adopt the white man's ways of doing and thinking. So, there is an urgent need to preserve what is left; and universities can play a role in this as the conservators of indigenous knowledge.

The second challenge is to start developing and integrating this knowledge so that it can provide solutions to some of the contemporary problems facing Africa. For example, a number of universities are undertaking important research and training in support of the field of traditional healing. So, there may be room for greater integration of traditional medicine into Western medical practices. Another traditional field with room for development is that of the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which is akin to the Harambee approach promoted by Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta. Ubuntu could be a unifying philosophy for the continent, although it must go beyond being a theory or approach proposed only by universities in order to have such an impact. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the concept is accorded greater importance outside Africa than on the continent itself.

The third challenge is to codify African languages, which comprise the continent's most extensive traditional-knowledge resource. This interview is being conducted in a foreign language (English) because this is the only common one available. This kind of predicament will only be deeper for the next generation. So, there is an urgent need to preserve African languages – and the best way of doing that is to ensure that they are used, including as languages of instruction. In the longer term, policy solutions should be produced to make some of these African languages usable across national boundaries.

Mahali: It seems that Kenya is ahead on the language issue, mainly because of the ground-breaking work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

Kahihu: Wa Thiong'o was jailed and exiled. So, sad to say, Kenya is not miles ahead. There is still a lot that needs to be done. However, if African countries collaborated on

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such a project, much could be quite easily achieved. Given the relatively limited, five-year horizons of elected politicians, the leadership would have to come from the universities as the only institutions capable of mobilising the intellectual and traditional-knowledge resources required to implement such a project.

Mahali: You mentioned Ubuntu ethics as an area of study that may be deepened so that it becomes more than a purely intellectual pursuit and can instead inform African ways of being and doing.

Kahihu: South African universities have undertaken significant work in codifying Ubuntu, which is a good beginning. Now the other universities need to start the work of producing applications from this codification and testing them. This may even entail returning to the roots of the concept which is not a monolithic one, but is the product of many different ways of thinking that uphold the principle that people are better off together than they are alone – which stands in opposition to the Western prioritisation of individuality. In this regard, it is interesting that those in the West are coming around to an Ubuntu approach, although they call it "new age" thinking – which seems a strange way of phrasing it for Africans, who take it for granted that those who have are obliged to help kinfolk in trouble.

Mahali: What are your thoughts around the contributions that digital technologies can make towards curriculum development and learning?

Kahihu: The CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute has for some time offered a basic introduction to information technology (IT) which is of particular value to students who may never previously have touched a computer. Then, in response to growth in the number of job and self-employment opportunities in IT, the institute started providing skills training in this field – and has been quite successful in exploiting this emerging sector in Kenya.

Subsequently, the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused great disruption in the education system from 2020, prevented the institute from implementing its usual teaching and hand-holding activities, which require a lot of face-to-face interaction. So, the institute had to reinvent the way in which it delivered its model for learning. Accordingly, it invested in developing a learning management system for blended learning, delivering skills remotely where possible and, in the other cases, finding creative ways of imparting practical skills without exposing students to the risk of Covid-19 infection.

The shift to online learning which was accelerated by the pandemic offers a once-in-a-generation, or even a once-in-a-millennium, opportunity to improve access to education, although it has been a struggle to convince the government of this. In this regard, the policy-making focus should be on the potential of the internet as a tool for delivering education on a universal basis, rather than on the infrastructural impediments that would need to be overcome to realise this vision. There must be an imagination of how society could be transformed if there were widespread connectivity and lecturers and

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trainers had been trained to digitise and deliver the content that they are presently only offering on a face-to-face basis. There must be an imagination of how the playing field could be levelled, if access to the best education possible were delivered to everyone via the internet, without the need, for example, to leave the village and travel to a remote city or town.

For example, at present, only about 44% of students enrolled at TVETs in Kenya are female, which is not as a result of any lack of interest on the part of young women, who are just as interested as young men in acquiring a technical education. Rather these young women are handicapped by issues of distance and traditional societal roles. However, their chances of acquiring such an education would be greatly enhanced if a large part of the TVET curriculum could be delivered without them having to leave the house and forego their domestic and caring responsibilities. They should then be able to complete the rest of the course, which would comprise mainly self-directed learning and practice, in their own time, reporting back on this, again, via the internet.

However, such a radical change to the system would be resisted by educators who envisage higher education institutions as places remote from society where students come to sit quietly in front of a teacher or lecturer and passively acquire knowledge; and also by trade unions representing education professionals who have been well-served by the current structure.

At the same time, I do not think there is any stopping the profound disruption to the system that was triggered by the pandemic. Rather I wish Africa was in the forefront of the changes that will take place, since the continent needs this disruption more than anywhere else given its relative lack of resources to train and teach everyone.

In this regard, satellite connectivity offers the possibility of leap-frogging the infrastructure-construction phase of internet development (and thus providing universal education), just as cellular technology allowed Africa to leap-frog the construction of telephone lines and wires for communication. In fewer than 20 years, cellular technology has enabled millions of people to talk to each other; and the implementation of the satellite communications revolution may also take fewer than 20 years.

However, the process has to be led from within society; and I think that universities should be leading the way, given the longer-term benefits that may accrue both to themselves and national populations from the rise of digital education – although these institutions may be reluctant to take on this role given the potential short-term loss of status that they may suffer as a result of the shift to digital.

Mahali: Could you describe the resource shortfalls, political challenges and policy constraints that may need to be overcome to realise this vision of a re-imagined African university?

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Kahihu: There are African countries that are undertaking brave policy work and sometimes failing but sometimes succeeding. I count Kenya among their number, as was shown by the story of the introduction of the M-Pesa system for money transfers via cell-phone which is now used across Africa. The system was introduced because Kenya's president at the time, Mwai Kibaki, refused to be swayed by fear and the blandishments of those with vested interest who opposed the introduction of the new technology.

At that time, there was a law under which such money transfers were the preserve of licensed bankers, that is, of established banks. Accordingly, a delegation from Kenya's Central Bank lobbied the president, giving warning that the M-Pesa system would harm the country's banking industry. However, Kibaki's response was he could not see how a relatively accessible means of transferring money could do any great damage and instructed the governor of the Central Bank to produce a plan for implementing the scheme.

Well, the initiative could have failed but it did not. Indeed, the banks quickly joined the new system for money transfers after it was launched in 2007 and have reaped greater benefits than the telecommunications firms that developed the technology in the first place. Indeed, banks across the continent are now earning much of their income by deploying digital means of lending, borrowing, transferring and depositing money.

This example illustrates the importance of taking some chances at the level of policy-making and not worrying too much about the damage that may be caused by failure, which anyway can be mitigated, given the benefits that success may bring.

Relating this example to the delivery of higher education services, the main challenge is that the policy-making is too timid. Aside from the issue of the separation of universities from the rest of society and the funding shortfalls that they face, there is the overarching problem of insufficient access to education. In this regard, the current infrastructure for the delivery of knowledge remains grossly inadequate – and the cost of ensuring access by establishing the required physical infrastructure of roads, powerlines and other connections is prohibitive. However, the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the kinds of responses that arose as a result offer an opportunity and the beginnings of a model for transforming the education system in a way that may provide an answer to the seemingly intractable problem of access. In this context, policy-makers should overcome the fear that radical action could lead to all the money and effort invested in the present system being lost. If this is the risk, it is worth taking given what is at stake – that is, the opportunity to provide equitable mass access to further education.

Mahali: So how can African universities become more agile in the way that they are responding to the rapid changes taking place in the world, such as those wrought under Covid-19 or as the result of, for example, political events and economic down-turns?

Kahihu: Universities need to be less monolithic. There are universities in Kenya that boast of enrolling 75,000 students on one campus, as if that were a source of pride.

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Better that they were to take pride, say, in creating institutionally-linked colleges or schools that were able to enrol 75,000 right across the country.

The government could also foster greater institutional agility by providing greater funding to enhance the universities' research function, which is one of their areas of strength. Relatively little money is given to research in Kenya, despite the overwhelming socio-economic and other problems faced by the country which such research could address. A renewed research mandate would necessarily enhance universities' agility and may even lead to reform of their administrative structures.

Mahali: What has been your experience of initiating large changes?

Kahihu: CAP-Youth Empowerment Institute is barely scratching the surface. The institute was established 10 years ago to help vulnerable young people. At that time, there were about 2 million vulnerable young people in Kenya and that number has increased every year, notwithstanding the efforts of the institute. So, in an effort to achieve a greater impact, it was decided five years ago that the institute had a responsibility to teach other institutions its methodology. Accordingly, it established a programme of collaboration with TVETs, providing them with the model and the skills required to implement it. To this end, a number of the institute's staff now train trainers and managers at these other learning institutions so that they can adopt a demand-led market-based responsive model for skills delivery. At present, this project is quite small-scale but it has proved effective and has brought the institute to the attention of the government, since most of the partners in the scheme are government institutions.

At the same time, the institute has not sought great engagement at the national policy level, given its core purpose which is to deliver concrete opportunities to vulnerable young people who have been failed by the present education system and who are in no position to wait for a policy shift. Accordingly, the focus is on directly answering the needs of these youth, albeit increasingly by providing technical support to education institutions so that they can help them more effectively.

Mahali: Are there any innovations or best practices to which you have been exposed in the higher education sector from which others may learn useful lessons?

Kahihu: For me the most important innovation that would make an immediate difference to the relevance of universities and to the development outcomes of African countries would be if these institutions were to become demand-led and sensitive to the development needs of their societies when preparing young people for the world after graduation. Universities should reform themselves so that they stop being isolated institutions and start working with those for whom they are supposed to be working, which should include employers; development planners; communities; and young people themselves across society.

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In addition, universities should be at the leading edge of producing research and solutions that address the disruptions that have affected education since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, although they have not adopted this role.

Mahali: Are there any more reflections that you would like to share?

Kahihu: I should emphasise that I am not opposed to the university system *per se*. Rather my belief is that it is time people demanded value for the investments that they have made in these higher education institutions. I do not think it is that difficult to provide such value; it just requires a change in attitude and thinking, and my hope is that this will happen.

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