Interview with Prof Patrício Langa
Interview conducted by Prof Ibrahim Oanda on 07 July 2021

Ibrahim Oanda: Could you briefly discuss your relationship with higher education?

Patrício Langa: I am a sociologist by training and studied the nature of higher education from an institutional and social perspective for my Masters and PhD. Subsequently, I undertook a number of field studies into higher education, especially in Mozambique and South Africa, with the goal of contributing to the overall understanding of higher education globally. Accordingly, I think it is timely that there is engagement in a better understanding of the developments in higher education in Africa, not only from the practitioners' perspective, but from the point of view of the academics and researchers who are trying to make sense of higher education, which is where I come from. I see myself as a professional student of higher education as a social phenomenon and in its multiple manifestations and dimensions.

So, for me the continent of Africa is simply the site where I examine higher education phenomena with the intent of make higher education intelligible not only on the African continent, but globally. This is what I aspire to as an African scholar, to contribute to the general theory of knowledge about higher education. In this regard, African scholars like myself are often expected only to perform science and research in Africa with the intention of contributing to understanding Africa. But I think the most important contribution that we can make as scholars is not only to focus on Africa, but to contribute to science in general, and thus contribute to Africa.

Oanda: In your professional and work experience, what would you say are the purposes and roles of the university in Africa?

Langa: The process that leads to the establishment of a particular social constellation or social formation or institution, as part of which that institution is endowed with attributes and is expected to perform certain roles, is complex and socially situated. So, for example, the roles and purposes of universities after the industrial and scientific revolution in Europe were different than those of these institutions during the medieval period. In this context, historians and sociologists have tried to establish typologies under which the university's roles may be labelled. Take, for instance, Manuel Castells, a sociologist from Catalunya in Spain who is now based in the United States (US), and his understanding of universities as dynamic systems embodying a number of contradictory functions. Castells attributes four main functions to universities: their role as an ideological apparatus, which, he notes, emanates from the European tradition of the Christian church during the medieval period; their role in selecting dominant elites, which was also a function of the European universities; the generation of knowledge, which now has become a universal role; and the training of national bureaucracies, which was a crucial role for the African universities inherited from the colonial masters after independence.

However, it should be noted that these four functions identified by Castells are typologies rather than absolute forms and represent a normative categorisation mostly based on, and referring to, the European model. In this sense, and notwithstanding their popularity as a frame of reference in Africa, and particularly in South Africa, they do not fully describe the evolution of this thing called "the university" in Africa, for which the conceptual framework is still being developed.

Meanwhile, the debate on university functions and roles continues today, leading to the emergence of different definitions for the types of organisations that are being created and their different and diverse purposes. So now terms such as the "entrepreneurial" university, or the "indigenous" university or the "popular" university have entered the discourse, which makes it quite difficult today to say, "This is the particular role or purpose of the university", since they are increasingly expected to fulfil multiple roles.

Oanda: Are African universities, as they are currently operating, relevant to the continent's socio-economic and political demands?

Langa: That is another difficult question, especially considering the multiple purposes and functions universities can perform in different historical moments, as well as the diversity of roles that each may perform. It is also difficult to ascribe a particular purpose to a university without being normatively biased, even as the phenomenon of the university has become universal.

However, one thing that would seem to be certain is that universities are relevant, otherwise societies would have done away with them. So, the simple fact that they

2

persist shows that there is relevance, even though there may be disagreement on what that relevance might or should be, or is. Indeed, it may be taken as a universal sociological constant that whenever and wherever universities exist, they are serving a purpose.

In the African context, there have been a number of historical and sociological processes that have made the university a relevant institution on the continent. Reviewing the history, there was the moment when their main purpose was to build and strengthen the sense of national unity after independence. The one national university which many countries had inherited from their former colonial masters after independence played a significant role in this respect. Subsequently, depending on the particular country and context, universities were assigned a more transformational, developmental role.
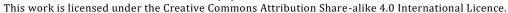
In this regard, the relevance of the African university has not been merely a function of normative determinations made by local politicians, it has been the product of a negotiated endeavour as the continent has encountered a strong normative conception of the university emanating from external actors. In other words, it is a by-product of the institutions inherited from the colonial masters and how these have been shaped under the post-colonial state, including by current national economic and governance demands. At times, this process has entailed contradictions between local aspirations and externally promoted notions of what a university should be.

Accordingly, relevance in the African context may be viewed as being determined by the extent to which the university ascribes to, and performs, certain roles considered by Africans to be important at particular historical junctures. This process has been influenced by the ability of Africans to negotiate and ascribe particular roles to the university in Africa, while engaging in a globally interconnected world. Specifically, those seeking to transform universities are still grappling with the results of the negotiations to retain and reshape the colonial universities after independence, which have entailed collaboration with a number of key stakeholders with their own interests.

Oanda: Taking into account the complexity of the evolution of the university as an institution on the continent, what kind of university would be needed to take Africa into the future?

Langa: Currently, there are two main competing visions of the university in Africa, and also globally. One is that universities should engage in the pursuit of knowledge through formulating conceptual and methodological problems which contribute to the global theory of knowledge. Under this vision, the emphasis is on understanding guiding principles. So, it is a reflexive knowledge that is being sought; and a reflexive kind of university that would pursue such knowledge.

Second, there is this prevalent, dominant idea that universities should seek to find technical solutions for perceived socio-economic problems and should have an instrumental role in improving governance on the continent. Under this view, the possibility of universities as places for the pursuit of knowledge is denigrated and placed under threat, with the institutions that adopt this agenda being labelled "ivory towers", even though this is not the case.

Indeed, the idea of universities as flagships for the generation of new knowledge has never been conceived as relevant for Africans. Not when these institutions were established by the colonial state; and not subsequently. Meanwhile, it has been the second idea of the university as a toolkit of sorts for addressing all the maladies of Africa that has prevailed. In my view, this is the main challenge that is preventing the establishment of a vision of the African university that is actually appropriate to conceptualising the problems faced by the continent in African terms so that they may be solved.

Which is not to say that the university of the future should be held responsible for solving these problems on its own. Rather the idea should be that the university, as a public good institution, creates a knowledge space within itself which can stimulate an environment beyond the campus gates in which African problems and solutions could be formulated in a more comprehensive way, beyond the merely technocratic.

Unfortunately, however, the instrumental vision of the university is winning at the moment and is denying Africa the opportunity to foster universities as centres of knowledge-production, although this remains a dominant model outside the continent.

Oanda: What are the likely future patterns of access to higher education and how do you envision the challenges of access being addressed in your vision of an imagined future university for the continent?

Langa: In seeking to answer this, I would first wish to clarify this idea of a vision of the African university of the future, or what may be termed the "dream university" for Africa. My dream would be that Africa and Africans could be able to define their own university – a university established on their own terms. This may sound like a philosophical position, but it is precisely what is needed at this moment in the history of African universities, even as this goal is, paradoxically, quite difficult to attain in Africa at present. The point being that until the shape of the university is determined by Africans on their own terms, which is not the case at present, then the definition of who should participate in the university also is being shaped by external forces.

In this regard, the present problem may be traced back to the 1980s, when a number of vice-chancellors and other political actors rejected the proposition that, given the challenges of maintaining the post-colonial university, Africans should just send their people to "real" universities elsewhere. Instead, it was proposed that so-called developmental universities should be established. At the same time, however, the

4

viability of the universities as functioning institutions increasingly came to depend on accessing external support – at which point the sector was forced to neo-liberalise and open itself to the forces of the free market.

At this point, the state was no longer able to exert~~access~~ sole control over the terms of access to higher education, including whether this should be on a universal basis or whether payment should be made in line with certain principles; and new forces, including local actors in the private sector, were able to pursue new agendas (some of which were inimical to the very idea of the university) which increasingly determined the kind of access on offer. Subsequently, many countries on the continent have continued to struggle to reach even the basic 10 percent threshold for access.

Providing a more direct answer to this question concerning the kind and extent of access that should be sought, I think it is important to differentiate between universities and other kinds of higher education institutions on the basis of the needs of the particular society. Accordingly, only those who pursuing knowledge should attend universities; while those seeking to apply scientific knowledge or acquire professional training, should attend other higher education institutions, including TVETs. The point being that, in a differentiated system, it is not desirable that everyone should be flocking to universities, notwithstanding the present discourse on the importance of the knowledge economy promoted in the Global North which has been deployed in support of such universal access.

In this regard, however, many African countries have failed to establish a framework for differentiating the provision of higher education; and instead continue to pursue the idea of universal access as a political priority. This despite the evidence of experience, which shows that the quest for the massification in an undifferentiated system eradicates the space for knowledge and leads to the production of graduates who have serious problems integrating into and contributing to their societies, or transitioning into livelihoods, employment or entrepreneurship.

In support of the drive to establish a differentiated system, it is worth noting that the process – including the definition of what a university is and what it should be for, as well as the definitions of the roles of the other components of the higher education system – may be led by the universities themselves, which have the capacity to produce the appropriate knowledge and understanding on this issue.

Oanda: What about the issue of funding? How should the universities be funded?

Langa: I am not an expert in funding, but based on this notion of differentiation, there should perhaps be a variety of funding mechanisms for higher education. Within this system, universities, which, under their knowledge-production role, produce benefits for the entire system and for society at large, should be viewed as a public good and funded accordingly.

5

Oanda: Are you suggesting that the university of the future should largely be funded from the public purse?

Langa: That is correct. Meanwhile, the various other types of higher education institutions which serve a more applied, instrumental kind of role, and which would be attractive to many students on that basis, could be funded on a more market-driven basis through a mix of mechanisms including cost-sharing, student fees and philanthropy (although philanthropy may also be used to boost the budgets of the publicly funded universities).
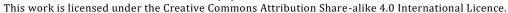
Oanda: As the students of the future come from increasingly diverse backgrounds, how should the universities of the future address their wide range of welfare, academic and environmental needs and concerns?

Langa: Student diversity is increasing as a result of democratisation processes, but there are still historical legacies of inequalities; and proper policies should be put in place to ensure that universities do not become elitist. At the same time, and this is the problem with the word "elite" which has an ideological connotation, it is possible to have a system featuring elite universities that are not necessarily elitist in their outlook. In other words, the description of a university as "research-intensive" denotes its function rather than any pretension to high status. Under this view, it is argued that by opening universities to students who may be seeking to attend for reasons of social mobility rather than in the pursuit of knowledge, the function of the university as a centre of knowledge production is placed in jeopardy.

In fact, and I might be a little bit conservative here, my position is that only those who are pursuing new knowledge, not only for Africa but globally, should find their place at university. Other students with different agendas, such as to apply knowledge, or to fix problems whatever those might be, should find their place elsewhere within the higher education system. And there should be space for everyone. In this regard, all that is required is the right policies to screen applicants, identifying who should go where, while also ensuring that inequalities are not reproduced in this process, such as through exclusive access to a university education for economically advantaged students.

In this context, one of the key challenges that should be addressed in establishing a differentiated system is the issue of status – and the hierarchy of status that currently exists in relation to higher education, which prizes a university education over a technical education. In some African systems, this obsession with status was made manifest when Technikons were renamed "universities of technology" not because their function had changed, but in the name of prestige. Part of the problem here is that such renaming creates a distorted idea of what the university's function should be within the higher education discourse – as if a glorified technical school also is a "university", which in turn has supported the agenda promoted by a number of

6

external stakeholders that a main aim of "universities" should be to produce graduates who can be employed by industry.

By contrast, in Europe, there seems to be some clarity about the purposes of the various institutions in the higher education system, with the various bodies labelled according to their function, which also has the effect of facilitating articulation within the system under which students may transition from one institution to another as appropriate.

Oanda: How should these future universities prepare students better for life beyond the campus gates in terms of employment and/or making an impact on society?

Langa: Taking the ideal conception of the university that I have proposed, graduates would have no need to seek jobs elsewhere beyond the university or the research institutions and the science and innovation apparatus. Of course, given that this is not how universities have actually evolved, particularly under massification, graduates do pursue careers elsewhere – which has led, for example, to the establishment of so-called "professional PhDs".
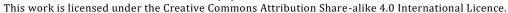
Meanwhile, in the African developmental context, the main demand in the productive and industrial sectors is for technical skills, which may be provided by other higher education institutions in coordination with these sectors. (In this regard, it should be noted that even the relatively few "knowledge jobs" being created by the so-called "knowledge economy" in Africa depend on skills that may generally be acquired through technical training provided by institutions other than universities.)

At the same time, although higher education institutions can produce significant benefits by aligning their training to the demands of the economy and the public sector, thus producing employable graduates and entrepreneurs who can generate jobs, the creation of jobs is not actually a function of the university; it is a function of the economy. If the economy is producing jobs, then there will be jobs for the graduates.

Oanda: What is the place of indigenous knowledge in the future African university; and how do we move away from the colonial university to an African university?

Langa: I think a great deal of intellectual capacity has been invested by some of Africa's greatest scholars and colleagues in seeking to address and undo the legacies of colonialism and coloniality, including neo-colonial forms of subjugation. However, although this is a fair cause, it is not a particularly scientific one. Indeed, I am of the view that the way in which the whole debate about decolonising universities and decolonising knowledge has been conducted has done more harm than good to the idea of the university in Africa.

For me, the main relevance of these attempts to decolonise the university from the perspective of southern epistemologies and indigenous knowledges, and so on, has been their political impact, in that these efforts seek to address and overturn a structure that has prevented acknowledgment of the contributions of Africans and other groups to science and knowledge as a global public good. However, there is also profound intellectual concern that this decolonial project, insofar as it valorises indigenous knowledges, is anti-universal – and is thus inimical to the idea of the university which I have mentioned.

Which is not to say that all kinds of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge, should not be promoted. After all, Europeans, Americans and Asians also have their own indigenous knowledge. But this should not come at the expense of the university and the kind of knowledge that is supposed to be produced in a university context both in terms of its diversity and the quality of its theoretical content. For example, in relation to theoretical integrity, it should be acknowledged that a racist scientist may be accurate in their observations despite their ideological bent; and it should further be noted that criticism of their racism should not be deployed to undermine their theoretical contributions if these are valid. And this is the main difficulty with decoloniality studies, notwithstanding the justice of their cause in seeking to abolish ideological bias.

Meanwhile, perhaps paradoxically, the most vocal advocates of this notion of decolonising the university, which is more of a political than a methodological campaign, tend to be sited in the former colonies and the Global North, perhaps from guilt or some kind of moral sense that the wrongs of the past may be repaired. However, in their advocacy for the localisation of knowledge, for the production of a particular knowledge agenda for Africa, they are undermining the very possibility of decolonising knowledge which they claim to be promoting. The point being that the pursuit of knowledge should be a universal agenda, which is the self-same function that has been withheld from the African university.

Oanda: What is your view of the place of digital technologies in the African university, particularly in the context of the way in which universities on the continent grappled with how to continue learning and teaching in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic?

Langa: The Covid-19 disruption exposed as an illusion the idea that African universities are places of learning; revealing them for what they actually are, which is sites of rote learning, the reproduction of mediocrity and the distribution of credentials, rather than places for pursuing new knowledge.

As teaching, rather than learning institutions, most African universities were completely unable to undertake their core activities under the Covid-19 restrictions – and since these institutions could no longer teach, the students were left to idle away the time at home. By contrast, if these universities were, in fact, universities, the students would have continued learning with the support of the academic staff and

with the help of digital technology, without having to be on campus, notwithstanding these widely expressed concerns about the digital divide.

So, the issue here is not so much about increasing accessibility through the deployment of digital technologies, but rather about how this moment of realisation may be used to recalibrate the system and liberate the students from the present, rotten kind of university, which doesn't even teach that well and instead promotes pedagogies that are not conducive to learning.
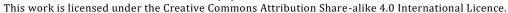
At present, the effort to address the problem of learning largely focuses on the establishment of dedicated "learner centres" with the support of European stakeholders. However, these initiatives have proved largely ineffective as the pressure of massification has led to universities being turned into quick-fix factories for producing credentials in bulk, but without any meaningful learning taking place. Which brings me back to my point about the need for a clear, differentiated system, under which the new technologies would be deployed as fit by the students who would be in charge of their own learning.

Oanda: From your experience, can you share any innovations that you have encountered in higher education that may usefully be deployed by the African university of the future?

Langa: I have encountered a number of systems and experienced different universities; and could dream of a new university that perhaps combines elements of these. For example, while undertaking a study into how the university may be linked to the world of work, I considered some of the features of the German dual learning system and how it came into being. Although such a system could not be transferred into the African context, the study offered insight into some of the benefits that can accrue from establishing a properly differentiated higher education system. I have also gained an understanding of the knowledge- and innovation-driven culture that has shaped both Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US, which, again, may inform the establishment of the ideal African university, even though the model produced by these US institutions could not be replicated wholesale on the continent.

At the same time as citing the potential of these models for promoting beneficial change, it is important to acknowledge that the reality is that there is no such thing as an African university (which makes the present obsession with benchmarking the higher education institutions on the continent according to the international university rankings somewhat irrelevant). There is the memory of the university which is the legacy of colonialism; and there are the new forms of higher education institution which have been established as an aspect of neo-colonial development; but an African university *per se* will never be created. And I am not sure that the establishment of such an institution should even be pursued at present because I do not think it is

ontologically possible. The university in Africa will always be an ambivalent experiment reflecting the very existential condition of the continent.

Meanwhile, however, universities in Africa that speak to local conditions and respond to local needs have been successfully established, including by private entrepreneurs - although these institutions lack some of the features that should characterise a university beyond the function of training graduates for the so-called market. In particular, the knowledge function is still generally missing.

In this regard, Mozambique offers an interesting example of the recent evolution of African higher education institutions. At independence in 1975, the country only had one university. Now it has about 60, of which 59 institutions were established from scratch deploying the notion of the university in response to the demands of the structural context. Notwithstanding the constraints that they faced, which included the heavy hand of the state, some of those institutions, especially the private ones, managed to create a space that could foster the pursuit of knowledge, albeit in a limited way.

With the emergence of these private-sector teaching institutions, which fostered significant competition in the sector, a number of public higher education institutions, especially the so-called flagship universities, realised that they could no longer claim a monopoly on teaching students and the production of graduates. So, in the quest for new niches of relevance, they started, for the first time, to articulate a research agenda; and assume the mantle of a research university. At the same time, these universities are inhibited from repositioning themselves as knowledge-driven institutions by their old-fashioned models of funding, governance and student recruitment – and so remain, by and large, teaching universities despite their grand claims to research-university status.