

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 Prof Teboho Moja

Interview conducted by Dr Alude Mahali on 07 July 2021

Alude Mahali: Could you briefly describe your relationship with higher education on the African continent?

Teboho Moja: I started focusing on higher education in South Africa from an activist perspective through my involvement in the formation of the Union of Democratic Staff Associations (UDUSA). I later joined the Centre for Policy Development (CEPD) as a policy analyst and later transitioned to government. In the early years of my career, I focussed on higher education in the South African context especially when I was involved in the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET). The goal was to collaborate with other colleagues working on the higher education policies that were needed for the country; to help monitor the transformation that was taking place in the national higher education sector; and to promote debates on current issues. As the Chair of the Board, I also pushed to extend CHET's work outside South Africa which led to a major project referred to as the Higher Education Research, Advocacy and Network in Africa (HERANA). It was a study of eight universities in eight different African countries. Subsequently, I increasingly focussed on the development of the higher education sector across the continent, engaging with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Association of African Universities (AAU). More recently, I have been focusing on the funding of research for higher education institutions in the African context. As part of this, I have been conducting a study into the governance of national science-granting councils in four Africa countries.

Mahali: In your opinion what are the purposes and roles of a university?

Moja: The main purpose of the university in Africa was settled in debates on this topic in the 1960s and remains unchanged notwithstanding the successive debates on the issue of the “relevance” of the African university: that is, it should advance social and economic development.

There is still debate in some quarters as to where the priority should be between the economic and the social aspect of development, especially in the context of a global economy. The answers may vary depending on the part of the world in which the university is situated.

Mahali: So, how relevant are African universities to the continent's present economic and governance demands?

Moja: My perspective on this is informed by Manuel Castells' framework of the role of universities worldwide. He outlined four main purposes for universities, the first one being the ideological function, under which universities are the bearers of values and norms. African universities seem to be fulfilling this function in that they are upholding a particular vision of society. The second purpose, according to Castells, is the role that universities play in selecting and socialising the elite; and African universities are playing this part, producing elites in the public and private sectors. The third function is to train professionals, which African universities are doing. However, their contribution to the fourth function of knowledge-production, which is the basis for social and economic development, is insufficient. At the same time, there is significant growth in knowledge production at African universities, as Johann Mouton has shown through analysis of bibliometrics. In addition, the kind of knowledge that is currently being produced is of significant relevance to the African developmental context.

Mahali: Could you talk about some of the competing visions for the university?

Moja: I have just finished teaching a course at New York University and we addressed the topic on whether higher education institutions are there to prepare students for the world of work or to prepare them to be good human beings in society.

Of course, you need to do both. However, in relation to the broader society, the debate has increasingly focussed on providing students with high-level skills to advance economic development within a globalised economy. Those perspectives have led to the closure or scaling-back of many humanities departments. This debate has been fuelled to some extent by a loss of confidence among the public in higher education institutions and a corresponding political unwillingness to fund them at the right levels. So, for example, former United States (US) president Ronald Reagan once asked why taxpayers should fund other people's intellectual curiosity. Accordingly, the human development component of higher education has been continuously deprioritised to the point that the students themselves increasingly look only for training in skills that will help them find jobs. At the same time, in their quest to increase their funding streams through tuition fees, universities are starting to listen to students as clients, and are giving them what they want and what they demand, rather than what they may need. In this way, higher education has shifted in response to the demands made by students, the private sector and society in general.

Mahali: In this context, what is your vision for the African university of the future?

Moja: I would like to see a university that provides quality education and that produces skilled, well-rounded graduates who care about society in the spirit of *ubuntu*, while advancing themselves.

Mahali: So how will this university that you imagine tackle the issue of access?

Moja: Access has to be opened for people who previously have not had access. The question then becomes: Why have those groups not had access before? The answer to this is three-fold. First, they may have been failed by the school system. Second, there may not be enough spaces for them in the universities or the fees may be unaffordable. Third, these prospective students may not acknowledge the value of higher education for themselves, seeing it as a waste of time. This view may be exacerbated by widespread reports of unemployed or under-employed graduates who have lost confidence in the value of a university education. In response, the broader relevance of education to society should be promoted so that these graduates start to view themselves as people who can give back and produce value for society, rather than as unemployed individuals who have failed to advance themselves.

So, all the pipeline issues need to be addressed.

Mahali: How should the university that you imagine address the issue of insufficient funding which has destabilised many African higher education institutions?

Moja: It is important to be realistic about the fact that there are competing claims on national budgets, including those for public housing and health, and that there are not enough funds to fund education at the right levels, which is a problem that is not unique to the African continent. Other countries have dealt with this and there are different approaches that can be taken. One is to provide student loans that are income contingent. In Australia and the UK, the system is that you pay up-front via a student loan, which is only paid back once you start working. So, if you do not get a job you are not left owing thousands and thousands of dollars. If people are confident that they will be able to work and earn enough to pay back their loans after they graduate, then they would be quite likely to back up such a scheme. Accordingly, the money used to finance such a scheme would circulate, being paid out and then being replenished as the loans are paid back, thus funding the next generation of students and the one after that and so on. This is a more viable option than bowing to political pressure and making higher education free for all. South Africa has opted to make higher education free for those students who cannot afford it and that helps in addressing inequities in access to higher education.

Mahali: What about the issue of student support, including in relation to mentoring; assisting the transition into livelihoods; career guidance; and the provision of an inclusive institutional culture?

Moja: A sense of belonging is crucial for students. If a university is taking somebody in, it is already saying: "I have confidence that you can do this." There is no point in having a revolving door where people come in, feel they do not belong and then leave. It is a waste of money apart from anything else. So, institutions in the US are grappling with these new buzz words: diversity, equity and inclusiveness (DEI).

In other words, access must be coupled with support and success, although there are higher education programmes that fail to do this. For example, while India reserves more than 50% of places for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether as a result of the caste system or poverty, these university entrants are then left on their own to survive. Similarly, Israeli universities lower their entrance requirement for students from the country's Arab community

but offer them little to no support. Brazil operates a similar affirmative action programme to open up access to marginalised groups. I have not studied their system closer to comment on whether those students receive support or not once admitted to universities.

Students admitted through affirmative action programmes are mainly first-generation students who often do not know what is expected of them. They do not bring with them the social capital of how to navigate the university space. For example, there may be opportunities and support systems that they are not harnessing because they do not even know that they exist. In other words, access has to be coupled with support so that the whole university experience is a positive, nurturing and exciting experience, as well as an educational one.

We should also keep in mind that the majority of undergraduates are at a crucial stage in their development while at university, coming to know themselves on their way to adulthood. So, they need to be nurtured if they are to be shaped into the kind of people who will care about society when they leave. This function of universities is lost if the focus is just on mechanically producing students with degrees, who are left to find themselves and decide what they want to do only once they have left.

Mahali: You have talked about how the human development of students and their preparation for the world of work need to take place concurrently, and that one should not supersede the other. In this context, how should universities address the issue of student transitions to livelihoods?

Moja: I think the institutional support should extend to these transitions. Universities should not just support the students while they are at the institutions but also in relation to their exit and their transition to life outside the campus gates. In this respect, universities offer a range of career counselling services, as well as training in the kinds of soft skills that may be required to enter and succeed in the workplace.

The South African Graduates Development Association (SAGDA), which was originally an association of unemployed graduates, has sought to address this issue by providing transitional support, including workshops on soft skills, and has examined why students are not getting employment afterwards – and in this way have managed to place lots of students into jobs.

So, there should be support for students upon entry to universities, during their time there and on their way out. In addition, to providing them with the funding to undertake a university education, they must be taken by the hand through all these steps so that they can be successful human beings and contribute to society.

Mahali: What place do indigenous knowledges have in your vision?

Moja: Why should certain bodies of knowledge be prioritised at the expense of other indigenous forms of knowledge in Africa, particularly since the societies on the continent have been there and have survived for thousands of years? This issue is crucial in relation to the relevance of African universities to the continent's development. If Africans embrace and harness their own indigenous knowledge, supplementing it with other bodies of knowledge that connect them to the rest of the world, that way they will be able to make a great contribution. For example, the

African philosophy of *ubuntu* should be exported and should take its place among the other great philosophical traditions.

One of the obstacles to this has been the collective nature of much of Africa's intellectual and cultural legacy. The continent's philosophies are not seen as owned by, or copyrighted to, particular individuals. Similarly, no one asks who composed the traditional African songs which may be sung by Africans wherever one goes on the continent. But this collective approach does not make Africa's knowledge inferior to those of others.

If universities embrace Africa's knowledge, they will also be addressing the issue of relevance. Instead of starting by providing students with information that comes from elsewhere and may have little bearing on their lives – thus creating frustration and alienation among the cohort – universities should study contexts and environments which the students are familiar with and use them as a starting point before moving into other spheres.

There should also be a greater emphasis on the significant amount of current knowledge that is being produced in Africa and which is published in journals and books in the West, but which is seldom incorporated into curricula on the continent. In this context, the notion of decolonisation should be re-examined. Does it mean throwing out everything that was built by the colonials while still sitting in a colonial type of institution? Or should it rather entail bringing together the various bodies of knowledge, including those that are based specifically in the African context, in order to produce an African graduate?

Mahali: What place does digital technology have in your vision in relation to the curriculum and learning?

Moja: Digital technologies may be deployed to expand access to higher education in Africa, helping it to leapfrog and catch up with the other parts of the world, such as the US, which have many more bricks-and-mortar campuses. These technologies may help the continent to forge alternative methods of expanding participation rates, providing higher education to many more people. In this regard, technology-based education used to be seen as a low-quality form of access to higher education, but the internet's potential as a tool for providing quality online teaching and learning became clear during the national lockdowns imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020. Accordingly, governments on the continent should make the development of national technological and internet infrastructures a funding priority.

This is not to say that I am advocating an end to face-to-face engagement, but rather I would argue for the extension of the components of face-to-face interaction into the online space, so that the virtual version can offer a similar kind of support. For example, students affairs professionals providing career advice and counselling have been providing services online since the lockdowns, enabling access to people who normally would not have had the opportunity to engage in face-to-face meetings due to the limitations of the physical infrastructure or cultural inhibitions in being seen accessing those services at an institution.

There is also room for the development of new mixed models for engagement, combining physical and online access. For example, students may be offered the opportunity to spend one or more semesters on campus, soaking up the atmosphere and the benefits of this form of engagement, as

well as studying online. They may be required to attend campus at the beginning or at the end of their time at university; or they may undertake the whole of their course online.

Mahali: What are the key challenges, whether these be political or a question of policy constraints and inadequate resources, that need to be addressed to ensure appropriate student support, livelihood transitions and promote indigenous knowledge and the shift to digital? And how may these challenges best be overcome?

Moja: For me, the biggest challenge is leadership. What is needed is leadership with a vision that can drive institutions to become what they need to be. However, leadership remains a big issue at present. For example, there are people in senior positions who should not be there; who do not understand what running an institution entails; and who have been promoted because of length of service or as political appointees. In this regard, proper leadership training and support is required to produce a new generation of university leaders.

A second challenge is the lack of higher-education studies in Africa which consider national higher education from a systemic point of view and which analyse the trends in relation to issues such as access, funding and differentiation between research- and teaching-intensive institutions so that the full range of alternatives and best practices may be identified and adopted. At present, there are a few departments in some universities studying higher education but not in a broad systemic way and not in terms of providing a knowledge base for Africa.

Mahali: Could you talk about your experiences of how African universities can become more agile in response to a rapidly changing world?

Moja: That is a tough question, in part because whenever one is talking about the continent, one is talking about such a big place. So, I talk with caution, even when describing visions for an African university. After all, is that a vision that would work in the Arab part of Africa or in Francophone Africa or in West Africa? And then there are all the national and institutional differences being faced.

Mahali: So, could you perhaps describe how change in higher education may be promoted in general?

Moja: I think transformation should be seen as a process and not as an event. The question is whether institutions can look at themselves as dynamic institutions that are open to change and responsive to new demands and new issues.

One way of fostering this kind of institutional culture is to find ways of bringing in the younger generation so that their new ideas and energy can be harnessed. In African universities, there is a broad tendency to treat early-career scholars as worker bees who are delegated to teach large classes and are not given the opportunity to undertake research. By contrast, at New York University (NYU) where I am a professor of higher education, early-career scholars are given the lightest teaching load so that they can spend more time mapping out their research agendas, undertaking research and establishing themselves in their careers. To this end, they are also able to access platforms for mentorship, and so on. In other words, just as there is an emphasis on

bringing in the students and giving them the right support, so also young academics joining the institution should be encouraged and supported in pursuing their careers as scholars.

At the same time, fostering young scholars does not necessarily mean getting rid of the more experienced, wiser and older members of the professoriate, although this is the tendency in Africa, where those who reach their expiry date at 65 are forced to leave regardless. In my present position, I can decide when I want to expire; that is, when I feel I can no longer make a contribution. Meanwhile, African universities are getting rid of people who have much experience, can still contribute, and should be given an opportunity to continue, especially if they have a good track record.

In general, the key is to be more flexible in the deployment of the human capital. There is a dominant model under which young academics are continuously teaching and marking papers and assignments and don't have any time for research, let alone raise families. An alternative model would be to offer set-term contracts to those older academics who would otherwise retire to teach or co-teach the undergraduate classes and grade the papers, thus freeing the young scholars to undertake research and to learn how to teach properly.

Universities could also make greater use of external resources in their teaching. For example, real-life engineers who may be excited at the prospect of interacting with and training young people could be recruited as adjunct teachers, which would also have the effect of bringing theory closer to, and testing it against, practice.

In general, the approach should be to continually introduce new initiatives as appropriate, which would have the larger impact of creating a dynamic, lively institution instead of one where the governing ethos is "business as usual". In this respect, NYU offers a fundamentally transformative space which goes beyond the rhetoric of transformation; a space where the leadership is prepared to take risks by encouraging its academic staff to try and realise their ideas for scholarship and teaching. So, for example, instead of being told that I should walk the tried-and-tested path, I have been given the space to be creative, and forge and teach a completely new set of courses that were never on the books before. In this way, the individual energies of the staff are released; and they are allowed to focus on what they do best.

Mahali: Are there any other best practices you have experienced from which others may learn?

Moja: I would say that, if you want to stay relevant, there is nothing wrong in turning the whole curriculum upside down. For example, the curriculum for my programme in higher education at NYU has been continually revised, adding new, relevant modules in response to a changing world; and degrees have been successfully overhauled and restructured, partly in response to the unaffordability and infeasibility of longer courses.

I tell students when they attend orientation that I am part of the institutional memory, and that while they may not like the way things are done now, they would also not have liked the way they were done in the past; but that, at the same time, their views are considered in relation to the content and structure of the course. In this regard, one recent major innovation was to get rid of the Master's degree exam, which merely comprised of a test on the courses that they had undertaken. In its place, a capstone project including workshops was established, under which

the students were invited to reflect on what they had learnt; produce their own philosophy of what they believed was needed in their professions; and identify their own future directions. In addition, collaboration among academics at NYU to avoid duplication of efforts and to foster resource-sharing is encouraged.

Mahali: Is there anything else that you would like to share? Do you have any final reflections?

Moja: When I was asked to participate in this research, my initial reaction was: “Oh, no! Another project on re-imagining the African university.” I have attended numerous meetings on the subject, including a workshop run by the Ford Foundation in the 1980s at which the participants were invited to lie down in a nice, serene, candlelit hotel seminar room and dream of the ideal African university. Meanwhile, I have never heard of such sessions to re-imagine the university being held in other contexts beyond Africa, such as in relation to Europe or Asia. This gives rise to a number of questions: What has come out of the previous re-imaginings and what will come out of this one? Have there been any significant changes in how the African university is being re-imagined or are the same ideas and issues just being re-hashed over and over? Are there any new ideas that have come out of the current re-imagination? It’s not that these efforts to move the agenda forward have not been characterised by good intentions; but rather that it seems that the conversation has become stuck somehow.