

## 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 Chris Bradford Interview conducted by Prof Catherine Odora Hoppers on 02 July 2021

**Catherine Odora Hoppers:** Could you tell me about your relationship with education and higher education?

**Chris Bradford:** I see myself first and foremost as an educator and secondly as an entrepreneur. I started teaching when I was a university student; I taught at summer school. Then I built a job training programme for homeless men, preparing them to re-enter the labour market. Then I taught at a 450-year-old boarding school in England.

From this experience, I became interested in this idea of purpose-driven educational institutions – the idea that great schools and educational institutions can have a clear mission and can clearly answer the questions “great for what” and “great for who”. In particular, having worked for a number of African students while in England, I became interested in the question of why these wealthy African students were being sent off to England to go to secondary school? What if there were a school that, instead of preparing English gentlemen who might never return to their continent, prepared African leaders?

Then, at graduate school, I met Fred Swaniker from Ghana who was the same age as me, and we teamed up to build the African Leadership Academy, which I now lead as CEO. We also built the African Leadership University at which I chair the programme and innovation committee. In an institutional capacity, Fred and I were also founding partners of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. In relation to this initiative, I

have, over the past 14 years, sought to prepare students to access prestigious global universities, and have also sought to break down barriers of access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In general, a key goal of this partnership with Mastercard Foundation has been to help universities do a better job of identifying and enrolling African students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack traditional credentials or high scores but be truly exceptional relative to their local environment. The Scholars Program has also sought to help these students transition into jobs after university. This aspect of the programme was initiated after it became clear that the quality of the first jobs made available to the graduates, as well as the subsequent trajectory of their career paths, were generally a function of their social capital, or lack thereof. Accordingly, further support was provided to students so that they could embark on the kinds of career paths that would enable them to lead change in their home countries – which is one of the African Leadership Academy’s key goals.

**Mamela Siwendu:** The notion of an African institution that can produce great African leaders of the same standard as those produced elsewhere is interesting.

**Bradford:** I believe the academy produces better, more committed leaders for Africa and at a lower cost than a place like Eton, for example.

**Odora Hoppers:** What are the core objectives of the academy compared with those of mainstream universities?

**Bradford:** The African Leadership University is a university; the African Leadership Academy is a pre-university programme offering leadership development and academic preparation to help pupils bridge into university. The curriculum includes three required courses: writing and rhetoric; entrepreneurial leadership, in which every student works in a team to build a business or a social venture; and African Studies. On top of these, the students undertake elective courses in their field of interest – for example, in economics or geography; physics, chemistry, biology or scientific research; creative arts; or international relations.

**Odora Hoppers:** In my view, this pre-university entry point which your leadership academy provides addresses a critical gap in the higher education system in Africa. From this vantage point, what is your view of the efforts being made by many universities on the continent to transform their curricula and structures and even the idea of the university itself?

**Bradford:** Universities should be organised around outcomes. At present, from a student’s perspective, the acquisition of a degree entails: having been tested for general intelligence; persistence (the student stays and does the work); and a level of social conformity (the student is not expelled). However, I don’t believe these factors fully correspond to the core skills required to transform the world. Universities must be focused on what students are learning and the skills they are developing for the world beyond.

I regularly receive job applications from students who have graduated with honours from some of the most prestigious universities in Africa, such as the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Makerere University. However, too few of them can write compellingly or even grammatically. I consider clear, crisp writing to be an indicator of clear, crisp thinking and a core skill for success in the labour market. So, the question then is: Are these universities serving their students well by graduating them with honours although they lack this skill? At present, these students may have met various indicators of intelligence; stuck around and collected a set of credits; and managed not to get themselves kicked out, thus showing some level of social cohesion; but they have not been assessed in relation to whether they can do what is required to become an active, engaged citizen-leader, and a member of the workforce who can live a self-determined, mission-driven life.

A number of steps had to be taken at the African Leadership Academy in an effort to produce individuals who would be successful at university and beyond. These included changing the institution's core curriculum. For example, ALA found that students acquiring A grades in English examinations and then gaining entry into some of the world's most prestigious universities were struggling in their writing classes once they arrived at university. So, ALA took the bold step of exiting the examination system and established its own two-year writing and rhetoric course.

Similarly, students seeking to build businesses or social ventures to lead movements for change need to develop leadership skills which can only be acquired through practice. So, ALA created an experiential curriculum that would enable this kind of development. Similarly again, anyone seeking to become a leader in Africa must understand the context in which they operate, including the dynamics at play in addressing particular problems and the value of local cultures and indigenous knowledge. That is why ALA created a core African studies course. These three courses also form the basis of the first year of study at ALU. A student cannot start studying for their particular degree at ALU until they have completed a course called "communication for impact" which is the equivalent of ALA's writing and rhetoric course.

Working backwards from the purpose of developing leaders who will shape the future, these core courses are continually assessed in relation to whether they are delivering this outcome. The ethos is to produce graduates who have the skills that they need to succeed in life. However, many universities are failing to do this. Too often, the evidence shows that the university graduates who are most prepared to succeed in life attended elite high schools, indicating that it is secondary rather than tertiary education that is having the greatest impact. In this context, efforts to improve access to the tertiary sector in Africa, which is a major challenge, may have little impact unless the experience of students is organised around the skills that they need to acquire in order to be successful after graduation.

**Odora Hoppers:** Higher education institutions in Africa struggle with this question of relevance. So, there are lessons to be learned in terms of rewriting university curricula

from your efforts to pioneer programmes such as that promoting communication for impact.

**Bradford:** Most undergraduate courses are assessed on the basis of the knowledge stored in one's short-term memory. Rather assessment should be conducted on the basis of measuring both knowledge and skills, the aim being to produce people who have learned how to learn and who will be able to continue to map a learning journey as they face new and challenging problems throughout their lives. This is a different kind of assessment to the kind that tests students by providing them with problems that they know are coming and then asks them to solve these in an examination. Too many courses are organised around lectures and too much assessment is organised around whether or not the brain's pail has been filled with facts, which are then set down on paper. There are certainly university classes in which students are being assessed on the development of skills and their capacity for learning, but too often students have to go find these classes for themselves.

**Odora Hoppers:** You have said that many universities tend to focus on filling their students with knowledge, rather than providing them with the skills to create impact with that knowledge.

**Bradford:** I do not adopt the extreme position, as some do, that universities should just become places for experiential projects. Knowledge still matters; and the ability to organise, store and recall certain forms of knowledge matters. But universities are getting the balance wrong. They are too oriented towards demonstration of certain kinds of knowledge that can always be found on the internet anyway, and under-oriented towards undertaking complex and unfamiliar challenges that force students to apply their knowledge and build the kind of skills that will allow them to succeed in the labour market and in a lifetime of leadership beyond.

In an effort to address the problems faced by universities, the tendency has been to produce massive well-designed top-down initiatives led by administrators which can take a lot of time and resources to implement, and which may only lead to meaningful change for students years later. A more effective, low-resistance way of shifting universities would be to offer a course for first-year students on how they may best take advantage of the range of courses and experiences on offer so that they can acquire not just the knowledge needed to obtain a degree but also the kinds of skills that will be of value in the labour market. So, instead of seeking change through a structural re-design, an alternative would be to identify the steps taken by the few students who master not only the knowledge requirements but also acquire the requisite skills to find work or establish businesses – and then the approach adopted by such students may be offered as a template for success. In other words, the most successful students should become prototypes, particularly for first-generation students who may otherwise graduate without any job prospects or entrepreneurial know-how because the university never required them to develop the appropriate skills and they had no idea of how to acquire these for themselves.

**Odora Hoppers:** Could you talk about the role of higher education on the continent in terms of context – that is, in relation to the African social context?

**Bradford:** There is a greater prospect of meaningful transformation of the higher education sector in Africa than in the US, where trillions of dollars and powerful institutional interests impede change. By contrast, in Africa we need to address the massive youth bulge and the relatively low numbers of students enrolling for tertiary education. Given that the Global North has its own problems in providing quality higher education, Africa is well-placed to take the lead on such global issues as enabling first-generation students to succeed at universities and beyond; and building universally accessible higher education institutions.

**Odora Hoppers:** However, the Western model for African universities has entrapped them; and there is a need for innovative thinking on how the modernist model for these institutions may be expanded to bring in that which it previously excluded. For example, there has been a move in South Africa to transform the sciences, law and economics as these are taught at university so that they incorporate African understandings and ways of thinking rather than just the modernist approach. For example, Western economics focuses on scarcity, while, in Africa, the focus is on abundance; in relation to law, the African focus is on restorative justice, while the Western approach emphasises retributive justice, and so on.

**Bradford:** In relation to other ways of knowing, there was a graduate of ALA who had grown up in Kyangwali refugee camp in western Uganda and who I felt was extremely prepared to succeed at university and in life, because he could figure out how to learn anything. He was adaptable; he knew how to ask for help and obtain support; and he was unbelievably resilient and persistent. However, he had only acquired low grades in his A-level exams, and the universities to which he tried to gain admittance could not see past these and his present academic position.

Having worked with him for two years, I saw something else. I saw his trajectory, which was more important than his position. To illustrate the point, two people may leave for the mall from the same place within minutes of each other, but the second person to leave may arrive first if they are moving faster. Nevertheless, universities tend to regulate admission and access based on what position a person has already achieved rather than their learning trajectory.

In this case, the student had covered about five years of course content in two years in order to pass his A levels, indicating that he had learnt much more than English students taking the same exams. But the form of assessment which had been established in line with certain expectations of educational success for the English elite was not designed to measure the speed with which he was learning and learning how to learn – in other words, his trajectory. We spent 18 months calling universities, pitching for this student, and he ultimately gained admission to a small university in Missouri in the US, where he graduated early as the top student in his class, having achieved almost perfect grades in biochemistry, which is one of the hardest majors.



The point being that he already had acquired the necessary learning skills, which the particular mode of assessment used for determining access to university – in this case, A levels – had failed to recognise.

The inadequacy of current models of assessment raises the question of how the capacity to learn may be assessed at scale. One solution in the online world, would be to establish a pre-term comprising a set of knowledge and skills that all applicants for university would have to undertake and that would indicate their capacity to learn. This would level the playing field between pupils from the elite schools and other pupils. I think such anecdotes can have power and may prove more useful than talk of other forms of knowing or decolonisation, which can be quite vague and can mean different things to different people.

Rather the discourse should be about how to bring the ways of knowing that are valued by universities closer to the ways of knowing that the world beyond our university values. Modern Africa's founding fathers had much to contribute in relation to this idea. For example, Tanzania's founding father, Julius Nyerere, valorised farmers' ways of knowing and argued that unless intellectuals and schools embraced such practical forms of knowledge, they were of little use.

**Odora Hoppers:** In this context, what is the African Leadership Academy's approach to indigenous knowledge?

**Bradford:** ALA does not teach indigenous knowledge as such. Rather it seeks to help students recognise the value of the various forms of knowledge that exist all around them, and in particular how indigenous ways of transmitting knowledge can be crucial to their success as leaders. Kenyan historian David Ouma, who heads the African Studies course at ALA, communicates the value of all knowledges by presenting case studies and examining the origins of various disciplinary approaches. For example, in relation to the study of medicine, the point is made that, prior to the establishment of missionary hospitals, African children who broke their leg did not necessarily end up dead or lame. Indeed, healthcare outcomes were in some cases better and in some cases worse prior to the introduction of scientific Western approaches to medicine.

In this regard, students on the course consider the way China has integrated its traditional medicine with Western medicine, so that when an individual has an ailment, they are provided with a choice of treatments at the pharmacy. David Ouma uses this as an analogy to try and help students recognise that, as future African leaders seeking to foster peace and shared prosperity, they need to study, respect and learn how to use traditional systems of knowledge, which are well understood by local African constituencies and which may be communicated orally through stories or symbolically through customs.

**Odora Hoppers:** What is the African Leadership Academy's approach to technologies in relation to education design?

**Bradford:** ALA is generally only focused on technology insofar as it enables access or efficiency. So, during the Covid-19 pandemic, incoming scholarship students who were stranded in their countries across Africa were sent airtime every week which they would use to log in via their cell phones to access courses. But ALA is not focussed on teaching the use of particular technological tools that may become obsolete in a few years. Rather the focus is on preparing students with the ways of thinking and being that will enable them to learn how to use the new tools that are yet to come. In this regard, ALA's view is that technology is important to the future of education in Africa but as an enabler, rather than as a source of content. This is not to decry the value of, for example, coding schools such as Moringa School in Kenya. Rather the point is that the value of such education should not be considered absolute but instead proximate to its potential to create employment and business opportunities. Accordingly, I do not think that the answer would be for, say, Makerere University, to instruct every student to take a mandatory coding class. The establishment of additional content standards misses the point. Instead, there should be a concerted effort to reflect on how the core skills that can help students to be successful after university may be fostered.

**Odora Hoppers:** What challenges have you met in realising ALA's vision; for example, in relation to funding, legitimisation and accreditation?

**Bradford:** ALA and ALU recognise the importance of establishing and maintaining quality standards in education, and are fully accredited institutions. However, many local higher education authorities have not legitimised or credited the qualifications offered by ALA. This has resulted in, for example, more students gaining admission to Yale, or Cornell, or Dartmouth, or Stanford than the University of Cape Town, because UCT requires that students have a certain collection of certificates which were dropped by ALA after it adopted its new, outcomes-based educational approach. So, in order to gain admission to UCT for its students, ALA uses the university's appeals process and the students have to sit for and pass additional examinations.

The broader problem is that the secondary examination regimes in Africa can be quite divorced from the skills that are needed for success at university and beyond, indicating a need to create pathways outside the core examination track. In this respect, I think about how difficult it is for a young man from a refugee camp to collect the right certificates; and how the higher education system is building walls over which people must climb rather than gates that they can open. And I would like to figure out how to fix that.

ALU faced similar challenges in establishing itself as an institution. For example, the campus was refused certification because it did not have a computer lab, although every student had a tablet. It was also obliged to meet stringent requirements around issues such as library access. In this regard, my view is that instead of seeking to regulate universities through a strict set of requirements, the authorities should judge them according to whether they are producing students who are ready for the world beyond. In other words, they should be audited not in relation to their infrastructure but rather at the back-end according to the capacity of their graduates and the quality

and rigour of the thought and principles underpinning the university's establishment. This problem, which is not limited to Africa, is something that I hope we can help to change.

**Odora Hoppers:** African universities and higher education systems are designed and regulated in a restrictive way. In response, it has been suggested that a kind of genealogical approach be adopted, that there should be a return to founding principles and what it was that made universities learning institutions in the first place.

**Siwendu:** Why was Mauritius chosen as the location for the African Leadership University?

**Bradford:** At the time, it was the only place where the university could get started. Elsewhere, the institution would have become stuck in a regulatory quagmire for a long time. Mauritius, meanwhile, had made higher education a national priority and was quite open to hosting new institutions in this sector as long as they had a degree-granting partner, which ALU had in the United Kingdom (UK). However, Mauritius is expensive both in terms of the costs of living and in relation to travel. However, it is a genuinely bilingual place, which is attractive for Francophone students; and has become a sort of flagship campus where students live for a short period. Meanwhile, most ALU students will now be attending the second campus established by the university in Kigali, Rwanda, which was founded on the basis of the proof of concept provided by the Mauritius campus.

**Odora Hoppers:** Can you elaborate on how Yale's admissions policy differs from that of other higher education institutions?

**Bradford:** I would present Yale as an example of a broader approach adopted by North American universities called holistic admission. Students write an essay; present a four-year body of work from their secondary school; and undertake a standardised exam, which is accessible to all. What that means is that if an individual can prove they have participated in a rigorous course of study and can write a compelling application essay, they are admissible at any university in North America. By contrast, in Kenya, a pupil has to have earned a certain number of points in their Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams, with the number of points determining the degree path available to them. So, for example, someone cannot study medicine unless they have an A or an A-minus aggregate mark in their KCSE.

One way forward may be to adopt a holistic admissions process that not only assesses the rigour of an individual's education, but also their performance relative to their context. So, for example, there was a young student, Ousseynou Diome, from an area of Senegal without electricity or running water. His grades were objectively low relative to pupils from high quality secondary schools in the city. But this pupil was extremely bright and extremely driven and, in the context of his home region, many standard deviations above the mean; and so, deserving of much more than the admission to technical school which his low grade would have earned. Indeed, this is a student who



had extraordinary potential and should be able to bridge into just about any university in the world and be successful there. And he did just that.

In this regard, ALA has found that, with appropriate support in organising their curriculum work, such students with the capacity to acquire the skills, habits and knowledge that they need to be successful can rank alongside the products of the wealthiest city schools. So, in relation to admissions policies, I am not advocating lowering standards, which is how people often interpret this focus on fostering habits of learning. Rather there should be rigorous assessment of the right things. In other words, admissions policies should be more flexible and should allow students to demonstrate the knowledge to which they have had access and the learning skills they have started to acquire insofar as these are indicative of success at university.