

### **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 Rekgotsofetse Chikane**

**Interview conducted by Prof. Thierry Luescher on 20 May 2021**

**Thierry Luescher:** What do you think are the purposes and roles of a university?

**Rekgotsofetse Chikane:** Originally, growing up, it was you are going to university to become a chartered accountant and then you go off and you get a job. But the perspective of my father [African National Congress (ANC) struggle veteran, the Reverend Frank Chikane) was different. He had gone to the former University of the North to study science and mathematics, but then he found the social problems that were happening on campus and said: “Well, I can use this campus and fight this.” So, I do not think universities necessarily should be for people to come and fight for issues but I also know for sure that they are not a space in which someone just goes to get a degree to get a job. I view universities as a space that provides a moment in your life in which you become prepared to go into the world, in a way that is denied to many South Africans because of our educational system. In this regard, I try not to put any value judgments on the type of people a university should be creating or the types of things that it should be teaching.

It should also be noted that universities are not necessarily a space where people come and learn new things. Rather universities can be a place in which you find better evidence for the beliefs that you already hold. So, for example, if you come from a space in which you know there is something wrong with the world and with our society but lack the skills, the language, the tools or the books to understand the precise nature of the problem, you can acquire and access these at university. In this respect, it is widely believed that a lot of people became

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enlightened as a result of the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) student movement which started in 2015, but in reality, it was more that people found the evidence that they had previously lacked for what they were already thinking.

As for the present role of the African university, I think universities such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) should stop pandering to the dominant narrative that our universities should be world-class and be trying to beat all the other top universities across the world. I feel that now there is enough evidence to show us that this approach is really not helpful. So, then the question is: What does it mean to exist without pandering to this dominant narrative which people are increasingly rejecting? In answer, some analysts look back to the past at what universities across the continent were doing in the 1960s and 1970s and say, "We cannot do that because that did not end up as well as we thought." At the same time, as long as we continue to live in insecure times, in which there is uncertainty about the academics and the work they produce and higher education institutions face the threat of being shut down, the university will remain in crisis. So, my position has changed from whole-hearted support for the Africanisation of African universities to one in which the universities need to have honest conversations about their roles and how they envisage navigating the present uncertainty and thus forge a new future for themselves.

**Luescher:** What are the competing visions of the university in Africa?

**Chikane:** One competing vision is to be more like empire; to look more like Oxford or Cambridge.

Another is to give the institution a nice brand-new coat of paint, which is this notion of Africanising the university, including the curriculum and the academics who teach the curriculum. In South African terms, the creation of such "Afropolitan" institutions often leads to increased racialisation, for example, in terms of bringing in more black academics, although it is important to do this. In addition, bringing in black academics does not necessarily mean that they are going to teach Africanisation in a particular way, or even at all. They might still represent empire because that is how our system works. Also, there are tensions among the academic groups beyond those between the old guard and the new generation. If you are an African scholar who is not South African, your space within the university always feels as if it is conditional, as if your presence depends on you only speaking your narrative of, say, a Kenyan academic and not presuming to speak about South Africa.

Then there is a third view of what the university may be which is led by an indigenised or decolonised grouping of individuals who are not falling for the trap of trying to establish an Afropolitan institution. I think their narrative is growing, although it is not yet necessarily influencing the thinking on a day-to-day basis. In other words, academics tend to take note of this strand of thought rather than actively doing something about it. So, for example, it is understood

that there is this thing called decolonising the curriculum, although the individual academic may not feel that they have to act on this; or it is acknowledged that there should be greater understanding of the lived experiences of students, although, again, this may not necessarily entail any action. In this regard, the progress in implementing the decolonial agenda always depends on whether there is a champion or a group of champions in the department who want to push this narrative.

Amid these competing visions of the university, there is also tension among the workers on campus, including the professional staff. For example, the professional staff might find allies with people who have an idealised sense of the university in line with the dominant northern narrative of what these institutions are supposed to be; while workers or cleaners may tend to side with the Africanisation narrative.

So, now the universities, especially the previously white ones, are in a period, of change and it will be interesting to see which narratives prevail.

**Luescher:** What would your ideal university look like?

**Chikane:** I think the notion of an ideal university is something of a misnomer and also creates the spectre of unattainable goals. For example, a target of X-amount of black academics may be set as a benchmark for institutional transformation – but as that target comes in sight, someone shifts the goal posts and says, “But what we really want to do is address the issue of the curriculum.” Meanwhile, preoccupation with the shifting goal posts takes the focus away from the actual activities that are being undertaken and how these inter-connect. In particular, those who are pursuing the ideal of the university which was conceived in the metropole are chasing a ghost. That ideal is constantly changing, constantly evolving because those promoting it never actually want you to be like them; they never want to have to admit that your university is on the same page as theirs.

In South Africa, a number of terms have been coined to describe the ideal that the universities here should pursue. For example, one popular notion was that the university should be “Afro-centric”. UCT used this term for a while, as did Wits. But the deployment of this ideal did not lead to these institutions significantly increasing their African footprint. Meanwhile, history keeps repeating itself in this regard, with successive vice-chancellors at UCT expressing similar visions and chasing unlikely ideals instead of just fixing the foundation of the institution.

**Luescher:** So what would be an appropriate reference point for an African university, now or in the future?

**Chikane:** I do not think there should be one. Iranian scholar Jalal Al-e-Ahmad writes about the breakthrough moment just before the Iranian Revolution in 1978-79 when it became clear that the country was refusing to build a society

based on western ideals. He uses the phrase “west-toxified” in this context, as if the west were an illness inside you that you cannot do anything about, although you know you don’t want it. At the same time, he notes that we also do not want to look back towards the past as a model for the future because the past was not as great as people imagine. He argues that while looking to the past can inform certain aspects of your plan for the future, it should not be the focus of action. Rather, the best way to go about things is to see what works right now, to muddle through this west-toxified space, although not by trying to revisit some aspect of the past. In this sense, you might not need a reference point for the development of the university.

However, it is possible to discuss the role of the university among its stakeholders, including the academics and the students, and agree some achievable goals and outcomes, although this would likely produce a number of significant challenges. A university deploying this process would be unlikely to climb the world rankings and may also be accused of lacking or betraying its identity – although it is questionable whether the present historical identities which are based on institutional rationales that no longer exist are something to which the universities should really aspire. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the difficulties, I would advocate having an honest conversation about how the universities can generate their own identities although this is difficult because we do not have the tools for this yet.

**Luescher:** What would the envisaged universities look like practically in terms of bricks-and-mortar and the issues of funding, access, equity and relevance that they face, including in relation to creating transitions into livelihoods for students?

**Chikane:** In terms of practical solutions, I think it may be necessary to hold a number of uncomfortable conversations about what universities can and should achieve. For example, the argument that universities should be open to all and the concomitant government targets for expanding massification have placed great strain on these institutions and led to a distortion of their processes. An alternative approach would be actually to cut the size of student cohorts at certain universities. This would create fundamentally different financial situations at these institutions which would no longer have to grow to compensate for reduced subsidies and which would also be able to offer improved student-teacher ratios and individualised attention that could improve the quality of educational and research outputs. However, although the quality of the tuition may increase as a result, there would then be the problem of how to cater to those youth who have now been denied the opportunity to access a university education.

Another example of the kind of uncomfortable conversations that may need to be held is whether the call for free education is actually any longer a priority demand given the levels of graft in government which make the realisation of this political pledge quite unrealisable. Although the government should be able to

afford this, it cannot if there is no money in the bank account as a result of corruption. For example, the auditor-general found that the government-run National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has incurred R5 billion in irregular expenditure in 2019/2020. In this context, the conversation has to be about what is the priority: Fixing graft or providing free education? In this conversation, as in that about the practicability of massification, there are bound to be winners and losers. However, at least the debate would be based on the idea of addressing the actual challenges and trying to create something for yourself, which is something that I just do not think the universities are doing – having honest conversations so that they can form identities of their own.

On this topic, the issue of graft at NSFAS can impede the evolution of a university given that the fund helps form the identity of certain institutions. For example, the vast majority of students at the University of Fort Hare are on NSFAS, which means that the institution's identity is inextricably bound to this organisation. It influences how students behave on campus; what they can do on campus; and how they experience campus. So, if Fort Hare does not solve the problem of NSFAS, there is really no new identity that it can forge for itself.

The point is that the material, foundational realities must be addressed in order to promote authentic transformation. Following Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the issues of decolonising the curriculum and whether students feel culturally at home on their campuses rank low compared with a lack of accommodation, daily hunger and insecure home environments which undermine the emotional well-being of students – all of which are common challenges at previously disadvantaged universities.

**Luescher:** What do you think is the place of indigenous knowledge in an envisaged future African university?

**Chikane:** My position is that just because knowledge is indigenous, that does not necessarily make it valuable. Indeed, its value actually tends to derive from its scarcity rather than any innate value or its apparent usefulness to society – which is not to dismiss its value, as many scholars in mainstream academic spaces do. Rather this is an argument for engaging with and appreciating such knowledge and, in the process, acknowledging and even increasing its value. In this respect, the idea of academic freedom, for me, is less about the promotion of particular liberal ideas than it is to do with academics proclaiming that there are different, relatively unexamined forms of knowledge that have come to their attention which they wish to investigate and with which they wish to engage – rather than dismissing these forms out of hand on the basis that they are unfamiliar. South African scholar and activist Archie Mafeji's work in the field of medical anthropology is a good example of just such knowledge. If someone dismisses his books which are primarily written in isiXhosa on the grounds that the work is indigenous, they are losing out on some valuable insights.

So then, the bigger question is how to ensure that indigenous knowledge is

included in the canon. In this regard, the main concern should not be to change the minds of mainstream academics who publish widely; rather it should be to ensure that the institution in which you are an academic prevents indigenous knowledge from being arbitrarily dismissed, including by the big publishers who tend to shape the canon.

**Luescher:** What would you say is the place of digital technologies in the curriculum or otherwise in an envisioned future?

**Chikane:** I think the future for South African universities is that you have to go digital in one way or another. However, given that there will be people who are left behind in this process, the key question becomes: How do you maintain the dignity of these individuals? I purposefully use the word “dignity” in this context rather than “access” – for example, in terms of having a laptop or enough airtime. The issue of protecting the dignity of the student cannot be addressed merely by looking at their economic means and taking palliative steps such as providing them with airtime and a laptop. This is like using plasters to dress a gaping wound. Such efforts cannot create parity between students who lack the means and those whose experience is just to wake up and plug into the wi-fi. In this regard, the situation under Covid-19 has created circumstances in which some students are deemed to be less than others and who must now interact with this world from this lesser position – and that for me is a question of dignity.

The other issue raised by the shift to online learning is a financial one. Last year, I advised members of the student representative council (SRC) at Wits that instead of pushing for increased subsidies for their fees they should be arguing that the fees themselves should be cut given the savings that may be produced by the shift to online education in terms of redundant infrastructure and abandoned campus facilities. Departments should be asked to itemise how the student fees are being spent, I advised, which could quickly lead to a reconceptualisation of the university’s various functions.

In fact, I think universities are aware of this potential threat to their financial model, which is why they pushed for a speedy return of students to the campus, thus ensuring that they could secure their fees – and in the process sustain a perverse system of funding that does not work for the benefit of students.

So, in general, the issue should be how to implement a form of digital governance that can produce genuine equity among students (rather than merely address some of the financial symptoms of the present underlying inequity); and that can leverage the savings derived from shifting teaching and learning online to ease or even expand access to higher education.

In this context, the issue of enabling greater access to useful intellectual property, much of which has anyway already been converted into digital content, is a moral question in the South African context, where there is a crisis in basic education and only a relatively small number of people enter university. Amid

widespread poverty, a university education in South Africa offers among the highest economic returns in terms of future income in the world. So, why would you deny individuals who would otherwise be unable to afford a university education that knowledge, if you could provide it for free?

**Luescher:** There is an interesting tension here. On the one hand you are arguing for open universities or some elements of this idea, but on the other hand you are also saying that maybe there are already too many students at university.

**Chikane:** No, the issue here is trying to enable maximum access to universities, but in a situation where there are insufficient physical resources. You do not have enough beds for students; you do not have enough seats for students; there is not enough food to go around. The scarcities and deprivation interact with one another to create what I would describe as an “emergent property” of the university which is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds become marginalised. The way the university and the government then try to address this is by fixing one piece at a time. But this approach fails to address the underlying problem or dynamic which is larger than the sum of its parts. So, for example, increasing the number of people in the university tends to exacerbate the problem. Student living conditions deteriorate in the absence of enough beds, which leads to a drop in academic performance, which then threatens the basis of the NSFAS funding. The net effect being the creation of reverse outcomes, with student marginalisation persisting as an emergent property of the institution.

However, when you digitalise your university, certain barriers fall away. The number of spaces in the online classroom are limited only insofar as there is an additional cost for an expanded licence using Microsoft Teams. In other words, the cost of accommodating a class of 200,000 people online would be a fraction of the cost of building a new lecture theatre or a new residence, although there would be the price of hiring additional academic staff to manage the new supervisory workload. The point is that digitalisation forces us to undertake a new cost-benefit analysis of the university.

**Luescher:** Where do you see your role in dealing with such changes and engaging around such change?

**Chikane:** On one hand, I have been brought into the university as a young black academic in the hope and belief that I will stay at Wits and move up the ranks. On the other hand, I have, from the point of view of the students, joined management. So, the challenge is to balance these two dynamics while not falling victim to either.

In this regard, the focus must be on more than just concentrating on one’s studies – there is a higher responsibility. One way in which I have sought to address this is by playing a mediating role between student activists and the university’s management, as a former student activist (in the 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement at UCT) and someone who now knows how management feel when

they hear student demands. In this regard, I look at the students making the same kind of mistakes that I made and I just want to shout at them to say: “Do not do what you are about to do because we know how this movie ends.” The biggest weakness in student politics in this regard is a lack of institutional memory; a whole generation of knowledge about student activism repeatedly disappears in a continuous three-year cycle. At the same time, I share my insights about is happening among the students with the heads of the various schools in order to bring the sides closer together and try and make the university a better space.

Beyond this role, I also believe that, as a young academic of colour, there is a higher responsibility on you to be excellent at your job. It is unfortunate, but this is the harsh reality, although not everyone can live up to that responsibility. We need not to get lost in the bureaucracy of the institution and become content with the life of an academic. We need to push the needle and prevent the university from functioning on auto-pilot. This is our responsibility given the sacrifices that people have made to enable us to inhabit these roles in the first place and in order to ease the path for the next generation.

There is also the important point of view that the only thing that matters is your students because this country needs more educated people. Our country is in such bad shape and we need as many hands on board as possible. In this context, I see my role as helping the university factory-line function effectively, while also always looking to elevate its outputs so that they are better than those that came before. For me, that is a primary focus of what I try to do.

**Luescher:** Is there perhaps one innovative or best practice that you have either observed or practised that could give an idea of the direction that universities in Africa should take?

**Chikane:** I think all universities should offer extended degree programmes featuring a one-year bridging course from high school to higher education as the norm for all students, although it will be tough to tell someone that they must spend an extra year in university.

**Luescher:** Can you describe a best practice in terms of a particular way of lecturing or a particular course you have undertaken?

**Chikane:** There was a semester-long course on international trade and bargaining at UCT which sought to simulate the conditions and processes at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) with the various students role-playing the parts played by the various countries at the organisation. So, for example, in the simulation, the United States (US) was allocated the largest pot of pretend finance, the most power and the biggest contingent of students to represent its interests. I was allocated the task of embodying Australian interests; and for eight weeks of my life all I thought about was that country’s politics and economic interests and how I could use my position on the pretend WTO to leverage these by, for example, seeking revenge against the United Arab Emirates



(UAE) for voting against me, or trying to turn Britain against France.

Most of the students who took this course came out saying that they now saw the worst in people, but it also produced a deep, if chilling understanding of the mechanisms of realpolitik in international relations by engaging students in the kinds of interaction that actually take place among diplomats. So, it was a course that not only made you realise how the world functions, but also produced the possibility of modifying your own behaviour.

Personally, I later deployed many of the skills concerning the analysis of human behaviour in contested spaces that I learnt on this course during the #RhodesMustFall movement, which was established the following year. During the #RMF campaign, I was relatively comfortable managing party-political differences, which were quite predicable. I kind of knew what the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) would do, or what the Democratic Alliance (DA) would do. But people politics are a different matter because someone might just not like you and there is nothing you can do about that and that is why a particular programme or actions is not working. However, through the international relations course I had acquired the skill of quickly identifying the people who did not like me and was thus able to divert such opposition at a relatively early stage.

So, the trade bargaining course was particularly effective because it included a tangible aspect, a simulation in which the nature of interactions within the teaching and learning environment depended to an extent on my actions and those of the other students. In this regard, I think more academics should be seeking to generate courses that can create that kind of tangible connection in one way or another. To this end, when I am teaching, I do not lecture with PowerPoint slides (although these may be available as a point of reference) because I believe that they impede the tangible interaction between myself and the students.

Another example of a course that creates an actual connection with the students and creates real-world impacts is the philosophy module in animal rights taught by Professor David Benatar at UCT. Most of the students who have undertaken that course, which considers the morality and ethics of animal rights, will tell you that they are vegetarian now. I admire that ability to get someone to walk out of your class with such a bohemian belief in what you just taught them that they are willing to change their entire lifestyle.