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. Adam Habib
Interview conducted by Prof. Crain Soudien on 25 May 2021

Crain Soudien: How would you describe your own position in the African higher education landscape?

Adam Habib: In the early 1990s, partly by historical accident and partly by design, I became involved in universities and university transformation. It was the dawn of the transition in South Africa. It happened by default partly because I was at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) as a postgraduate student. I tried to become a research assistant there but was told that rather I should think about the University of Durban-Westville (UDW), which was later incorporated into the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). So, I went to UDW at this point of transition and subsequently became involved in a whole series of transforming institutions which opened up a career pathway in the academy, but more importantly a passion for transforming institutions of higher learning.

Twenty years later and via UDW, UKZN, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and the University of Johannesburg, I returned to Wits as vice-chancellor in 2013. On this trajectory, I became aware of the importance of differentiation among higher education systems, although their mandates do not have to be rigid; and the importance of Africa having notable research universities to enable a global production of knowledge that is contextually located in its entirety. In other words, and notwithstanding the importance of post-progressive institutions, if Africa did not have its own research universities, then the global knowledge production itself would be skewed which would disadvantage how science, how policy and how invention is actually produced. In this regard, I was quite struck by the work of Tania Douglas who was a scholar at the University of Cape Town

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(UCT). She wrote about how new biomedical technologies cannot be deployed in Africa because they are not contextually located. So, this question of context is not just an issue for the social sciences or humanities but also for biomedical and other sciences.

During my seven-year tenure as vice chancellor at Wits, a key concern was how to establish an African institution or a collection of African institutions that would allow scholars on the continent to compete effectively at the global level. It was about the energy that was put into research and into attracting people to this end. For example, the establishment of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) was about forging a network of institutions that would enable higher education on the continent to compete globally.

Now, that is the positive side of my experience at Wits. The negative side was that as much as there was success in upping research by 70%, producing more postgraduates, and increasing the institution's global partnerships, this was achieved despite a shortfall of resources which prevented the university from competing effectively with the leading higher education institutions globally, notwithstanding the quality of the scholarship that was nevertheless being produced. In this regard, the establishment of ARUA may be seen as an effort to try and level the playing field. It was about arguing that Africa should reimagine its higher education; that the existing model of higher education partnerships was primarily concerned with identifying talented people and attracting them through scholarships and other means to places such as London, New York and Beijing. Increasingly the research was showing that, outside Singapore and China, 80% of people were not returning to their home countries after receiving such academic opportunities. The problem being that this was weakening the human capacity at public institutions in the developing world at a critical historical juncture when they needed to start thinking through how to address development challenges which have become increasing transnational in character – such as those relating to inequality, political and social polarisation, this present Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, water provision, renewable energy and so on.

Every one of these challenges requires global solutions. For example, you cannot resolve inequality in a national context unless perhaps you are the United States (US) with its large, dominant economy – and even that is open to question. The present pandemic has made this clear. For example, although the United Kingdom (UK) has delivered 60 million vaccine doses to its population, it will find itself back at square one in the face of new variants. So, the quest for a global solution to this pandemic is not about charity from rich countries, it is about their own safety; and this is also true for climate change, inequality, and social and political polarisation. In this historical moment it has become imperative to find global solutions; but finding global solutions requires institutional capacity and human capabilities across the world, including in Africa. Meanwhile, the present model of partnership actually tends to weaken individual institutions in the global south. The response should be to reimagine higher education as a network of institutions, as a network of capabilities. In this regard, the technologies already exist to enable a blended learning approach that can make the institutional and national boundaries porous.

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However, there are two main interrelated factors that prevent this approach from being adopted: a lack of political will and the constraints produced by the current dominant business model for higher education. In relation to political will, the question is: Are we prepared to think beyond national boundaries? In relation to the business model, the constraint is the corporate approach which requires the vice chancellor constantly to watch the balance sheet and ensure they break even.

But there is the potential for another approach. For example, SOAS where I have been the director since 2021 and which is a small institution at the University of London with a mandate to study Africa, Asia and the Middle East, could pioneer a new business model for higher education based on the establishment of partnerships that transcend institutional and national boundaries.

So, for example, I have approached Wits and suggested that its institute for social and economic research (WISER) in Johannesburg becomes a joint body owned by both Wits and SOAS, with the latter underwriting 50% of its cost. Under such an arrangement, the institution could access research grants made available by the government in the UK while remaining located in the Global South. In exchange, it would supervise SOAS students. In addition, a number of joint Masters and PhD programmes may also be developed. Such an arrangement could provide the model for a new form of networked university institution that crosses national boundaries.

However, the opportunity to transform the global academy in this way and in the process address an historical moment that requires contextually located global solutions is being missed by the British, by the South African and by others. The fact is that the United Nations (UN) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should be leading this conversation, not some small institution in London; and organisations such as the Mastercard Foundation and George Soros's Open Society Foundations should be investing the money required to test such models for internationalising higher education and to enable them to be rolled out on a large scale. However, the need to reimagine higher education and produce institutional capacity that is globally constructed is insufficiently understood by the foundations, the sector's leaders and the politicians at this historical moment.

Soudien: What would be the role and purpose of this new model?

Habib: Any effort to establish a network institution would entail fostering a more complex higher education system, a higher education system that begins to co-curriculate. For example, it may seek to offer a Masters programme in how to deal with pandemics, which would entail producing a programme addressing the full complexity of the different ways of responding to a pandemic in the middle of London, or Khayelitsha informal settlement in Cape Town, or West Africa. Co-curriculation is required to speak to that complexity and to present the factors that may affect the effectiveness of pandemic responses in the various contexts. Such a course would produce thinking about public health that is far more powerful than the mere production and dissemination of vaccines. It would also address such issues as water, sanitation and social responsiveness.

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Such co-curriculation would have to entail co-teaching in order to incorporate the perspectives of multiple experiences; co-credentialling (for example, a public health degree offered by the University of Makerere with University College London (UCL); and co-financing. Split-site scholarships offering pedagogic relationships at a number of institutions, with some modules acquired in person and other remotely or via blended learning should be offered. Such a system should also foster interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in a far more significant way. It would entail a reimagination of how the undergraduate speaks to the postgraduate and how interdisciplinarity may be constituted both in terms of the boundaries between disciplines and how knowledge may permeate across these.

However, it is difficult for university vice-chancellors, who are under pressure to break even rather than to reimagine the curriculum, to act as the interlocutors for the promotion of such transformation. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there is nothing that drives vice-chancellors faster than money. So, if there were a set of donors and global political players willing to make resources available for such a transformation, then it could start to take place.

So, for example, a conversation started between Wits and the University of Edinburgh about establishing a partnership to produce a joint Masters with modules on offer from both institutions and a mixture of face-to-face and blended learning. A key feature of the proposed programme was the comparable strength of the partners – thus avoiding the pitfall of a strong institution in the Global North effectively exploiting the services of a weaker institution in the Global South. Instead, the partnership was to be based on a relationship of equals in which both institutions could reconfigure and compete with each other. At the same time and notwithstanding its structural virtues, it was noteworthy that the establishment of this project entirely depended on the provision of external funding.

In this regard, it was as an effort to solve the financial conundrum posed by such innovative projects that ARUA with the Guild of European Universities issued a joint communique in 2019 proposing that the European Commission ringfence 10% of its official development assistance (ODA) to the African Union (AU) for the establishment of such partnerships between Western European and African universities with the aim of reimagining higher education at the global level – although this displeased a number of AU officials. A similar funding model was implemented when ARUA received a £20 million grant from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for 10 African universities to partner with peer institutions in Britain.

The point is that it is possible to intervene politically to reconfigure the deployment of existing resources or to work with donors such as Open Society Foundations and the Mastercard Foundation which may act as interlocutors to reimagine higher education by creating new forms of institutional and human capacity able to address transnational challenges.

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Soudien: With reference to African universities and your experience of ARUA, what is your assessment of where these institutions are in relation to this set of possibilities? What is the readiness of African universities to move into this space?

Habib: I think it is uneven and limited. Most of these institutions are beleaguered. They are so immersed in day-to-day survival mode and some are constrained by their political systems and by structural inequalities which limit their capacity. At the same time, and partly as a result of these constraints, those who are leading these institutions gravitate to understanding the inequality of the global academy and a willingness to reimagine partnerships, recognising the need for this. All of which suggests that there is a role to play for selected institutions in this historical moment, even if by default rather than by design.

So, for example, an institution like Wits or the University of Cape Town (UCT) is particularly powerful compared with those that have been weakened such as the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar. Partly because of South Africa's history of inequality these institutions have been bequeathed with some significant capacity and significant locations, although neither are sufficient to enable them to continue as they are.

Of course, UCT does not have the scale of resources to compete with, say, University College, London; but compared with many of the ARUA institutions it boasts significant capacity. Stellenbosch University also has significant capacity for its own peculiar reasons, having sidestepped the conundrum of transformation that has embroiled the erstwhile liberal universities in South Africa and in the process, quite paradoxically, inheriting the liberal mantle for itself. Outside South Africa, similar institutions may be found in China, Singapore, South Korea, parts of India, Brazil, Ghana and, in time, Rwanda.

Meanwhile, the drive to produce a more global education system faces two main challenges. The first is the tendency, popular with Open Society and in North America, to focus on promoting collaboration among private universities and higher education institutions, such as, for example, the African Leadership Academy. The problem with this is that development depends on Scale; and, regardless of the problems of public universities, they enable scale, whereas a private university, however progressive and liberal it may be, cannot.

The second is this belief that all universities are the same, that they must all have a similar mandate, that they all need to transform – when actually any successful higher education enterprise requires differentiated mandates. Some institutions will be more focussed on teaching. Some will be more postgraduate- and research-oriented. Some will be a complex mixture of both functions. In part the challenge to differentiation may be seen as a function of vice chancellors' ambitions. We all always want to move somewhere in the middle – but there is a danger in that. The answer to this conundrum is to confront the historically derived notion that research-intensive universities have a higher status than others. In a differentiated system, the legitimacy of a variety of university mandates must be recognised, as must the virtue of offering a choice of higher education institutions.

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Global collaboration then should take place in the context of differentiation. The idea should not be that SOAS, for example, goes and aligns with anybody and everybody. Rather it should choose selectively, collaborating with institutions of a similar capacity and with a coincidence of mandates, thus creating a research network. In this way, it may create a practice, an exemplar for others to emulate and replicate in their own fields. The production of this and other exemplars of networked collaboration in line with the differentiated mandates of particular sets of institutions may be worthy of funding by major donors such as Mastercard as part of a drive to help reconstruct higher education on a genuinely global basis.

Soudien: Are there examples already on the continent which bring you close to what you are talking about?

Habib: Yes and no. There is a research centre in KwaZulu-Natal which works on HIV/Aids – the Africa Health Research Institute – which was established as a partnership between UKZN and UCL and which is completely funded from the UK by Wellcome Trust. At Wits, there is the Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit (Agincourt) which is partly supported by the South African government, but mainly via partnerships with Oxford and Harvard through which funding from the US government's National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Wellcome Trust is sourced.

Then there are qualifications offered in the private higher education sector which entail students moving among countries, creating an international learning experience and offering contextual experiences. There are also joint programmes in the public sector, for example, between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Singapore University in which the students divide their time between the two institutions; and between UCL and Yale, in which the classes are taught at both institutions simultaneously.

But a lot of these kinds of experiences and experiments are taking place at the inter-departmental or inter-institute level or in the private sector rather than at the public institutional level. Which is why I am so interested in pursuing such engagement at the inter-institutional level through SOAS.

At the same time, the support for producing such initiatives is quite limited. The innovation is appreciated but the emphasis in the governance is always on finding the funding and achieving sustainability first – which can impede efforts to reimagine the whole higher education project in a fundamentally new way. There can also be resistance among the institutions in the Global South. For example, the response to the proposal that SOAS could collaborate with WISER was received with some scepticism at Wits. Instead of embracing the finance on offer, WISER's response was: "Yah, but you know, do we want to be seen as an institution of the North? What are the consequences of that?" So, it would seem that the reimagination has to happen on multiple fronts.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the contested nature of this debate, it seems to me this is where the real conversation should be happening.

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Soudien: You have spoken about big donors helping to facilitate this kind of experimentation. But if this money is not going to come from the donors, are you then saying that such projects are not possible?

Habib: So, I am saying that it is possible, but there are a number of things that you are going to need to accomplish in order to enable vice-chancellors to square the circle of pursuing a potentially costly innovative strategic agenda while meeting the short-term goal of balancing the institution's books.

First, donors must be found to pioneer a set of academic experiences at multiple levels that can create a repertoire of examples of institutional collaboration which in turn may prompt the global system to move in this direction.

Second, a set of political resources must be brokered to support such movement. This may not entail accessing new money but rather ensuring that collective resources which may be ensconced in transnational or global institutions such as the European Union (EU) may be redirected in support of the global education project. Part of UNESCO's role should be to reimagine the historical issues involved to this end. The World Health Organisation (WHO) could also be playing a major role in this regard amid the present pandemic as it argues for global solutions and the development of an international health sector that can offer these. Such efforts may also leverage the present drive at national government level to increase local capacity for the production of vaccines and semi-conductors – the former in recognition that, in the light of the pandemic, vaccine production should not be left only to India; and the second in response to concerns that Taiwan, which produces 56% of the global supply of high-quality computer chips, is vulnerable to Chinese aggression, potentially leaving the rest of the world unable to manufacture many goods or sustain the development of the internet.

Third, the task of implementing the new approach to global education may, once it has received the appropriate political support, be seconded to a private sector entity which is not constrained by the politics and economics of dependence on student fees and which has the flexibility and financial resources to help produce a global platform. For example, although Mastercard could not achieve this on its own, it has enough cash to become a broker to mobilise more funding. So, imagine if Mastercard walked into UNESCO or approached the Secretary General of the UN and said, "We are putting down $100 million" or if it walked in with Soros and said, "Here is $1.5 billion. Now can we broker UNESCO or EU resources on top of this? And by the way, it is in your interests, because if we don't do this, the next pandemic is going to wipe us out." Or perhaps the pitch would be to foster academic collaboration to address climate change because there is a political appetite for this; or perhaps it would be to advance the field of mathematics. And once collaboration had been brokered in one field, it could be brokered in another. So, the challenge is not just an issue of resources, but also one of agency. Who is in the network? Who are the agents of this kind of project? Part of the problem is that some of the people who have the cash lack the imagination; and that some of the people who have the imagination lack the cash or the networks.

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Soudien: What is the role of the state in all of this?

Habib: The conundrum is that the state as it is presently constructed looks at the national; and as the state becomes increasingly chauvinistic the greater its propensity to act as a nation – that is, within the framework of national rather than continental boundaries and interests.

So, for example, the UK and the other European countries know that whatever they do in relation to climate change, they cannot really address the challenge effectively unless they convince the US and the big countries in the South, such as China, India, South Africa and Brazil, to do the same. Indeed, the global carbon credits industry which aims to condition behaviour in the developing world, was established on this basis. Similarly, the World Health Organisation is constantly saying you cannot resolve the current pandemic on a national basis, but only through a global vaccination programme, which is what the COVAX facility is about. Meanwhile, financial analysts have argued that you cannot get back to a global economy without figuring out how to deliver a global vaccination programme. A similar logic has shaped how states behave in relation to nuclear weapons – that is, on a transnational playing field.

So, there is a continuous attempt to think beyond national boundaries and convince people to act in collective ways. The question then becomes how do you create an incentive structure for nation states to act transnationally and to share their resources transnationally. In this regard, the European Union, the UN including UNESCO and the International Science Council all have crucial roles to play due to their capacity to access the world. At the same time, countries in the Global South, including South Africa, also need to do more. For example, the South African government recently produced a Bill on the internationalisation of higher education that was more moderate than anything that has come out of the UK under a Conservative government.

So, I think there are multiple failures, by the Europeans and the British, by the global movement and by African governments, including the South African government. In this context, this present research for Mastercard should be at the heart of the current debate and legislative programmes on the continent – but it is not.

Soudien: Could you talk about how the internationalised system that you envisage would affect the students themselves?

Habib: Imagine a student who is offered a course, for example, on climate change at UCL, and then picks up at least 50% of their modules from UCT, which has a good climate change programme, and also studies in Singapore and perhaps Buenos Aires. They would thus acquire a series of contextual experiences; and their educational identity and experience would be constructed in a transnational sense, grounded in multiple localities around the world and drawing on global knowledge sources. In addition, the support on offer in terms of learning outcomes, which may include learning new languages, would be assisted by the capabilities that exist in multiple institutions. Such a programme could also be more cost effective because the student would not necessarily move to study in London; they could

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be ensconced in UCT but yet pick up modules in London. In addition, you would be facilitating institutional development by enabling resources to transcend institutional and national boundaries. So, UCL does not get all the cash; the funding would also be directed to UCT and Buenos Aires and Singapore, or wherever.

Furthermore, the kinds of global student identities that could be constructed through this model which is institutionally located in public universities would be more powerful and far-reaching than the elite ones which are presently being constructed in private universities deploying a similar model.

Soudien: What is the role of local culture and indigenous knowledge in all of this?

Habib: Local culture and indigenous knowledge are fundamental to this model. For example, as Tania Douglas argues, if you are serious about deploying technologies in the developing world which have been produced by global science, local knowledge is crucial because technologies do not get deployed in the abstract. They are deployed in actual contexts and these contexts are defined by local culture; by local understanding; by the way power is constructed; by the way water is provided; by the way spatial location is organised.

In this regard, Douglas makes the case that Africa has become a graveyard of biomedical technologies because these have been so constructed for, say, Boston or New York, that they are incapable of being implemented in the middle of, say, Makerere or Accra. The outbreak of Ebola in West Africa from 2013 to 2016 offers a case in point. The challenge there was not one of vaccines or therapeutic intervention, but one of culture. The burial of the dead according to Muslim customary practices was allowing the pandemic to spread. A religious interdict was required to permit safe burials. In this way, cultural local knowledge resolved what biomedicine alone could not. So, a key lesson is that global science has to be located in the local context and straddling academic disciplines.

Similarly, the development of mapping via apps would need to deploy completely different data in San Francisco, say, than in Khayelitsha informal settlement in Cape Town, where there are few street names. Of course, if the developer is based in the middle of San Francisco and has never been to Khayelitsha the challenge may remain unaddressed. The point is that a re-imagination is required in order to acknowledge that the local is integral to scientific development.

Soudien: But how do you get that conversation going about local and global knowledge in the context of these hyper-codified epistemes which govern our disciplines? How can you bring together these parallel frameworks for knowledge production which are often in sight of each other but rarely meet?

Habib: One of the impediments has been the dominance of essentialist, even racially essentialist, perspectives in the political and public discourse, including within the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and National Research Foundation (NRF) in South Africa. Which is partly why I find Tania Douglas so interesting, because she comes at the issue

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through the lens of biomedical engineering. She does not come at it through it the lens of political science. For her, the conundrum is one of technology rather than identity, which effectively depoliticises the conversation in a constructive way. In this regard, her work is useful in the construction of the idea of contextual relevance. And there must be other scholars in other disciplines who have also come to acknowledge the conundrum that their technologies are failing to resolve challenges that they find, and then seeking to grapple with that problem. That is where I think the logic of indigenous systems should be located.

In this regard, the production of transnational courses, the content of which is shaped by local knowledges in different places may act as a catalyst for the development of more complex curricula in general, as a new generation of academics who have been schooled globally forge new disciplinary approaches based on their own experiences. The co-curriculation that would emerge could also serve as an antidote to the racially essentialist historical approach of universities in the Global North to partnerships with their peers in the South, which has tended to see them either as quantitative proving grounds for theories developed elsewhere or as sites for studying particular cultural forms such as dance and music.

Soudien: Is there anything else that you would like to address?

Habib: Given that the digital technologies are in place to enable us to go a long way down the road to a new kind of international higher education, although they still need to be improved, the problem is no longer the technologies. The present conundrum rather is the lack of political will in a world that has become more polarised and nationally insular, as well as the current business models dominating the sector. In this context, as a vice-chancellor, as a director, the question is: How do you address the challenge of aligning your immediate short-term priorities with your strategic agenda? Even for somebody like myself who knows that this needs to be done, this is a real conundrum.

Soudien: I think we need new politics and we have not got them.

Habib: That is exactly right and I must say that, globally, I do not see the politics improving. It is kind of crude. You either get the Right, which becomes nationally chauvinistic, or a Left which has not reinvented itself and still pursues an old-model politics of the 1970s.

Soudien: I think that conceptually and theoretically we need new frameworks here; and in the meantime are going to see this anger and resentment, but with little insight about how to be able to take it to another level.

Habib: My argument is you have got to deal with the politics, because if you do not have the state involved, you cannot do it to scale; and if you cannot do it to scale, you cannot produce development or at least inclusive development. That is the dilemma.

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