

### **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 Fred Swaniker, Mr Kuda Mangwe, Ms Kanyinsola Ojeshina and Mr Jeremiah Chikhwaza**

**Interview conducted by Dr Alude Mahali on 03 September 2021**

**Alude Mahali:** Can you describe your relationship with higher education on the African continent?

**Fred Swaniker:** I run a network of higher education institutions called the African Leadership Group, which comprises the African Leadership University (ALU), which has campuses in Mauritius and Rwanda; the African Leadership Academy (ALA), which is a business school which provides a postgraduate programme for mid-career executives; ALX, which is a career accelerator for young people; and The Room which offers a community providing employment support and recruitment services. The network is not a university as a such, but it does provide higher education, offering post-secondary skills development to young people in Africa. So, I'm a practitioner and I am also looking at disrupting the system and reinventing how higher education is done in Africa and even globally to make it more relevant for the 21st century and to prepare people for the future.

**Mahali:** In your opinion, what in broad terms is the purpose and the role of a university?

**Swaniker:** Historically, the role of the university was to produce knowledge and it was a centre of research which tried to push the boundaries of the world's intellectual stock; a place where new discoveries were made and developed and shared with the world. Historically, universities were not set up to develop skills, they were knowledge enterprises. So, quality assurance at universities is focused on research. The university rankings consider research as the main output measure, and there have never been any rankings based on the skills of the graduates or the jobs that they create or the entrepreneurs that are produced. The rankings also measure input metrics such as the number of professors with PhDs; the number of books in the library; the number of

computers; and the extent of the real estate. Those are the measures of quality. However, this notion of the university is predicated on a scarcity of knowledge, which is no longer the case. When knowledge used to be scarce, you had to go to university to get it from the brain of the professor or from the library book; but today, thanks to technology, knowledge is ubiquitous, it is abundant. Which is not to say that there is no need for research universities or for fundamental deep research that can push thinking in the social sciences or technology or engineering or whatever. But I think that Africa's need right now is for skills above everything else.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The knowledge is already there – how to purify water, etc. So, the mission now should be to take the formulas and apply them in Africa. The pressing need is to equip young people with skills so that they can be employed or employ themselves, because unemployment is the single biggest problem facing Africa right now.

In addition, universities should also be promoting innovation, which is very different from invention. Innovation entails taking existing knowledge and tools and applying them in unique and unconventional ways to solve problems. The goal should be to cultivate new mindsets, that is, people who can think differently; challenge the status quo; and start from fresh principles in addressing the problems of Africa. People who can use the tools, knowledge and technology that exist to solve these problems as quickly as possible, inventing new practices so that Africa can be transformed.

In this respect, the universities of today should be producing problem solvers, innovators and entrepreneurs who can actually drive African society forward in different sectors, whether it is in science, technology, agriculture, or whatever. They should be producing individuals who can solve the large challenges, so that the ordinary citizen who have not had the chance to go to university can benefit. The production of such graduates is the only way to justify the massive investments that have to be made in higher education, although, unfortunately, universities are generally not prioritising this mission,

**Mahali:** So, how relevant are universities on the continent to the current economic and governance demands of African countries and what would make them more relevant in meeting these demands?

**Swaniker:** Most universities are not in touch with the problems of society. Most professors have not worked in the real world, or they only worked in the real world 40 years ago. They're focused on reproducing themselves as a group, rather than trying to produce problem solvers. In general, the people who work in most universities are not in touch with the problems of African society today. There's a massive barrier or disconnect between academia and the real world. There are not enough partnerships with corporations, employers and the government which can bring the real world into the classroom and take the classroom into the real world. Most learning continues to be theoretical and impractical. It is not applied. Students learn theory but not how to apply it to the real world.

There is also this idea that it is not decolonised to use content and knowledge from the rest of the world, which is a romantic notion. My view is that knowledge should be taken from wherever, if it is of use. I don't care whether it is black, white, Indian or Chinese. If it can solve an African problem, I will take it. In this regard, I think that content and knowledge should be considered on their merits rather than on the basis of where they come from.

So, there should be a focus on the African production of knowledge in the fields of culture, heritage and history in order to address the bias that can characterise such knowledge when it is produced externally. But in fields such as science, technology and agriculture, which are more universal, there should not be discrimination against particular knowledge on the basis of its source. If there is a refusal of anything that comes from the West, then the continent will lose out on all the progress that has been made in other parts of the world using this knowledge. Rather the approach should be to copy the knowledge; bring it here; and mix-and-match it in different ways, based on local conditions, in order to produce the necessary innovations.

**Mahali:** Could you talk about the competing visions for the African university?

**Swaniker:** There is the vision of the research-intensive university, that is, an African-based, -owned and -led centre of excellence for the production of knowledge in the mould of institutions such as Harvard, MIT, Oxford and Cambridge. Then there are those universities that are teaching institutions which seek to produce employable graduates through the transfer of knowledge from the professor to the student. Then there is another competing vision, which is that universities should be producing innovators, entrepreneurs, disruptors and leaders. This is the vision that I advocate.

**Mahali:** What is your vision for the future of Africa's universities?

**Swaniker:** Knowledge is no longer essentially scarce. So, the purpose of higher education should not be to acquire those facts and figures which are available anytime. Rather it should be to learn how to learn, and then to learn how to solve problems. So, it should not be about acquiring the piece of paper known as a degree, but rather about developing a particular mindset and an ability to learn which can be used for the rest of one's life – to become a lifelong-learner and a problem-solver equipped to adapt even as the world changes. This is crucial given the rise of artificial intelligence and automation which will eradicate many of the present kinds of jobs. In this context, it will be the thinkers, and the learners and who can learn new things as the world changes, who will remain relevant.

The second point is that, in order to be relevant, universities will need to produce students with digital skills who are equipped to live in a digital age, which is crucial if Africa is not to be left behind. Such skills may be taught as part of a six-month, or one-year or three-year programme in the higher education sector, which must be flexible in this respect. This should be a huge push. In other words, the higher education system needs to produce a large cohort of graduates who can generate the solutions to the continent's development. This cohort could be produced faster and more cheaply if higher education leverages the new technologies. An additional benefit of producing such a cohort of graduates is that the continent can then export its talent, but by working remotely – in other words, without the brain drain. This would bring in foreign currency and also address the issue of youth unemployment, which may otherwise not be resolved domestically given the shortage of jobs on the continent.

Third, the focus of the higher education model which I am promoting is on the student as the driver of the learning process, and not the professor. In part this is because the initiative is trying to build a system around an abundant rather than a scarce resource. The view is that there is a massive and growing number of pupils matriculating from high school every year in Africa, about 15 million to 20 million; and, at present, universities can only absorb about 2 million of these pupils. Meanwhile, an insufficient number of professors are being produced to teach them in the

traditional way. In fact, it would take hundreds of years to produce enough professors to teach these matriculating pupils. So, a different approach to post-school learning is required – one in which the student can teach themselves, given the wide availability of information now available, as well as each other. In this new vision, the university is built around an abundant resource, that is, all the brilliant young people in Africa.

This new vision of the university also entails continuous learning throughout one's life. The higher education system should be one in which the individual can engage for the rest of their life. For example, an individual may acquire a certain skillset over eight to ten months which enables them to work in a particular job for two years; but then they may want to become a manager, so will need to acquire more skillsets over, say, a two-month period. But then, three years of work later, they may need to acquire data science skills, so will need a further two months of training. In this way, the individual never graduates, but is always learning.

The vision for the initiative is also very inter-disciplinary. The belief is that problems cannot be solved by considering them through the lens of one silo alone. They need to be considered, for example, at the intersection of the politics, the science and the geography of the issue. So, the aim is to drive inter-disciplinary thinking that relates to the interests of the student and the field in which they are planning to work. In this respect, their learning experiences may relate to the challenges facing Africa, including in relation to healthcare, climate change, governance and youth unemployment, as well as around opportunities in the areas of agriculture and the creative industries. So, the learning is aligned with a broader developmental purpose.

Another distinguishing feature of the model is that it takes learning outside the classroom. Research has shown that in acquiring a skill, only 10% of the necessary understanding is produced in the classroom, while 20% comes from developmental relationships with mentors and coaches and 70% comes from experience. (This is known as the 10/20/70 rule.) In other words, people learn by doing. In this respect, higher education which focuses only on that 10% of understanding that is produced in the classroom is only unlocking 10% of human potential. Meanwhile, the African Leadership Group is trying to unlock 100% of human potential by valuing the full range of learning experiences beyond the classroom. In this way, people are produced who, rather than sitting in a box for three years thinking about theory, have actually been engaging with the real world through internships; attending committees; solving problems; building prototypes; conducting experiments; and implementing projects. In other words, through applying the knowledge immediately.

**Mahali:** In relation to the barriers that may prevent young people from participating in higher education, what role does mentorship play in your vision?

**Swaniker:** So, the model seeks to leverage many of the principles of the sharing economy. Many companies, such as Uber and Airbnb, leverage this idea of distributed resources under which a lot of value can be produced by people whom you do not necessarily employ. For example, in the field of entertainment, the old model of expensive shows featuring highly paid stars distributed via a limited number of television channels has been replaced by new forms of entertainment distributed on YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, which are produced much more cheaply by a wide range of everyday people.

So, there's a huge opportunity to implement a similar model in education. There are a lot of experienced and educated people who are capable of providing the mentorship, advice and

coaching that students need. This is the basis for the ecosystem that ALG is building. At ALU, for example, a robotics engineer from Google teaches students robotics at a two-week residency programme in Mauritius; and a vice-president from Google spends a month teaching data science. A former BBC editor for Africa also spent a month on the campus. A former minister of trade and industry from Botswana came and taught students, simulating trade negotiations between countries. A wildlife conservationist also came. And while ALU provided them with accommodation, it did not pay them a cent.

The idea is that you could build a global database of people who are retired or semi-retired professionals, each of whom give you 30 hours a week or 30 hours a year of their time. Then a student who is interested in interviewing one of these people for their project on agriculture or nature conservation or whatever could go into the database and book 30 minutes of that person's time. They then interview them and the interviewer and interviewee rate each other. In addition, there is a lot of content that has already been produced by people that can be leveraged. By tapping into such free resources – brilliant minds who want to share their knowledge – the cost of education can be significantly reduced and a cohort of mentors and coaches are provided for the students.

**Mahali:** How are you addressing the other barriers, such as those relating to the issues of access and funding?

**Swaniker:** Student-driven learning; learning which takes place outside the classroom; and leveraging existing free global resources – all of these things cut the costs. Accordingly, ALG has been able to reduce the cost of training software engineers, for example, to \$300 a year. This is training that would previously have cost \$20,000 in Africa or \$70,000 in the US. So, this is quite affordable for many more people.

ALG is also adopting a new decentralised model that will eliminate travel and accommodation costs for students. Previously, they came to Mauritius or Rwanda to undertake their studies. Under the new model, they will only spend four months out of a three-year degree in Mauritius or Rwanda and the rest of the time connected to one of 50 hubs across the continent. The hubs provide internet access for the 10% of learning that takes place online, as well as a community of students offering the benefits of a social life, including clubs and the other kinds of activities that tend to be offered on campus. Meanwhile, the students spend 70% of their time undertaking actual projects in the local community and interacting with mentors and peers and corporate partners who may want to hire them. As a result, the cost, which used to be \$16,000 when students attended the campus in Mauritius has come down to between \$2,000 and \$3 000. In this respect, ALU was one of the few universities to cut costs under the Covid-19 pandemic.

ALG has also been looking at innovative ways of financing the cost of education for those students who cannot afford even the new lower rates. It has been exploring instruments such as income-share agreements under which students don't pay for their education up front but rather pay later through a share of their income once they are employed.

Another funding mechanism being explored is The Room, which is an agency offering employment and career support. Individuals pay a subscription to join The Room after they gain employment; and these subscriptions can then fund educational opportunities. The Room will also generate revenue from companies willing to pay to access talent, that is, to hire staff from

among the members of The Room. This mechanism can help people to be trained for free in a sustainable way.

The key is to consider the issue of affordability from both sides, which must entail costs being cut. If the system is one in which it still costs \$50,000 a year to train someone, then it is always going to be impossible to raise enough money. However, if the costs are reduced and new funding models are found, then greater access to higher education is feasible.

**Mahali:** Where in your vision do transitions into livelihoods feature?

**Swaniker:** The Room is a talent community which students enter after they have completed one of ALG's training programmes and which they belong to for the rest of their lives. It is a community which comprises three main elements. There is a pathfinder who is akin to a talent agent. The pathfinder talks to their charges every three months or so to understand their interests and passions, and whether or not they are employed. The pathfinder helps the former student find their first internship and their first job; and if the goal is to start one's own business, the pathfinder helps to source the necessary venture capital. The pathfinder working with an individual throughout their working lives, helping to manage the successive transitions in their career. In this regard, the community of talent in The Room, includes youth; those who are in the middle of their careers; and senior people who want to mentor and advise others.

The Room also offers a technology platform; its own private LinkedIn. This allows members to engage with each other and also serves as a noticeboard providing personalised recommendations about content and jobs, as well as events and other opportunities that can foster progress in one's career. In addition, physical spaces called The Room are continually being established across Africa and around the world to allow the talent to gather and network with each other, because 75% of jobs are never advertised but are filled by word of mouth.

In this regard, a key problem with transitions is that people are generally only able to access the minority of opportunities that are disclosed publicly. So, The Room is addressing the need for a powerful network that can enable individuals to access those 75% of opportunities that are hidden – whether it is a job that you want, or mentorship, or capital for a business.

At present, The Room is building a powerful network to support talent and to enable it to reproduce itself. The idea is that a member of The Room, whichever city they are in, can meet other members of the community, which may include a potential manager or investor. Similarly, anyone looking for top talent, knows that they may find it in The Room. This is the infrastructure which members are paying to access. Individuals who pay 20 bucks a month subscription to the Room can plug into this ecosystem for the rest of their life; and companies pay to recruit from The Room. This revenue is then used by ALG to pay for training.

**Mahali:** So, is the community in The Room largely African at present?

**Swaniker:** It's global; and it's global for three reasons. First, for African entrepreneurs to be successful they need to be able to tap into global capital markets. In my own journey as an African entrepreneur, I have raised over \$600 million but only 3% of that has come from Africa where the capital markets are very shallow

Second, there is a need for access to global markets in order to sell African products beyond the continent. This is particularly necessary because the purchasing power in Africa is so low that if local entrepreneurs only sold on the continent, they would be unlikely to create significant wealth. They would just be transferring poverty from one part of Africa to the next.

Third, a global reach is necessary because employment markets have become much flatter, particularly since Covid-19. An African can work remotely but without being in Africa. So, The Room is a global platform seeded with African talent, including the many graduates from ALG institutions, but also one that should attract talent from all around the world, which will expand the ways in which African talent can transition into meaningful livelihoods.

The Room is also increasing its focus on entrepreneurship. The aim is not just to wait for companies to hire ALG graduates, but to support them in creating their own jobs and employing other young people – that is, their peers.

**Mahali:** So, are the pathfinders engaged on a voluntary basis?

**Swaniker:** It's a mixture. There are full time pathfinders who help the talent find their first and second jobs. But there are also a lot of experienced people who want to mentor and support the next generation in a voluntary capacity. In terms of how The Room is organised, those who are already employed and have experience are expected to be the pathfinders for others who are younger; at the same time, they are also able to access a powerful network of relationships that can enable them to progress in their own careers.

**Mahali:** What is the relationship with networks such as the Africa Careers Network (ACN)? Is there collaboration?

**Swaniker:** Well, the Africa Careers Network was created under the present initiative. So, this idea of The Room is like the Africa Careers Network on steroids. The idea is that instead of employers seeking to hire ALG graduates via ALA or ALU, they come to The Room. In fact, the Africa Careers Network may be seen as a product of The Room.

**Mahali:** So, Jeremiah, Kanyinsola and Kuda are all in The Room? What do you do in The Room?

**Kuda Mangwe:** I work closely with ALG to communicate the idea of The Room and how it operates. The idea is revolutionary and needs to be communicated properly. In particular, the message about The Room's networking and the power that this can bring in solving some of Africa's challenges needs to be continually emphasised and amplified.

**Mahali:** Kanyinsola, are you also involved in the branding aspect of the initiative?

**Kanyinsola Ojeshina:** A main focus of The Room is on the importance of building relationships. For example, in the past year Fred Swaniker conducted a series of "pathway" interviews with a number of global leaders and senior executives who shared the benefits of their experience with members of The Room. So, the aim is to build a community of talent within which people can forge life-long relationships. In this regard, my job entails promoting the benefits of The Room: how it helps talented people build relationships and find work; and also, how it helps employers find appropriate staff without using recruitment agencies, which can be quite limited in their approach.

**Mahali:** How old is The Room now?

**Ojeshina:** It is still relatively new – only about a year old.

**Mahali:** Is the subscription to The Room yearly or monthly?

**Ojeshina:** Either, depending on what is more convenient.

**Mahali:** Do the pathfinders or mentors pay a subscription?

**Ojeshina:** There are inhouse pathfinders who work with the Room and who take young leaders through the various ALG programmes; and there are pathfinders who are nominated on a more voluntary basis who may well decide to subscribe.

**Mangwe:** There are three main groups of people. There are young people who are looking for that first break and who are looking to get their careers going. There are those who are mid-career, that is, they have about 10 to 15 years of work experience and are now looking deeper than just finding a new job, but are rather starting to talk about impact and legacy, and opening this door or that. And then there are people who may find fulfilment in being able to create pathways for others.

In terms of the subscriptions, the service is free for those young leaders who have just entered The Room until they have been helped to find the right connection. Mid-career members pay a subscription depending on the level and kind of support they are seeking, which may be in the form of financing or relationship-building or real-life experiences, and so on. Then there are the pathfinders, who may be engaged on a permanent or on a need-only basis.

The Room also provides employers with staff who fit their institutional culture. A common challenge faced by recruiters is that it is difficult to accurately assess from a CV alone whether an individual is a cultural fit for an organisation. Research has shown that 70 to 80% of people lie or exaggerate on their CVs. So, the employer may have to shoulder the risk of whether a particular new recruit meets their needs. However, The Room addresses this issue because there is already a relationship with the particular individual and a good understanding of their leadership and practical capacities. In other words, the person has already been vetted for culture-fit.

The Room's goal is to include 20 million people, which sounds like a lot of people but is actually quite small in the context of the talent-finding world, compared with LinkedIn which has about 750 million members. The idea is that The Room will provide a fine group of humans, like the top tier of those on LinkedIn, who have been vetted and are ready make an impact.

**Mahali:** Where are you physically based at the moment, Kuda?

**Mangwe:** I am in Zimbabwe.

**Mahali:** So, the room has a pan-African reach. Fred, what role do you see for indigenous knowledges in the work that you do and your vision of a reimagined higher education institution? What place do culture, religion, language and indigeneity have in this vision, if any?



**Swaniker:** There's definitely a place for the creation, curation and dissemination of indigenous knowledge. However, this is not necessarily a focus of ALU or the African Leadership Group, which is more focused on creating innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders. To this end, the methodology is to take knowledge from wherever it comes from and apply it to forge African solutions. The focus is not to document indigenous knowledge and history, although there is a need for that.

**Mahali:** What place do digital technologies have in your vision?

**Swaniker:** They are crucial. In the next decade, the aim is to produce millions of people with expertise in these technologies, including software engineers and developers and data scientists. The new technologies also underpin ALG's processes, enabling its initiatives to go to scale faster, at lower cost and in a more quality-controlled way. Digital technologies are also deployed to access all the knowledge and content that exists and to pick and choose the best teachers. So, for example, instead of only being able to access the professors at a particular institution, as is the case with the traditional model of a university, ALG's model deploys digital technology to enable students to pick professors from a range of institutions.

**Mahali:** We have talked about some of the funding and access barriers faced by higher education but not so much about the larger systemic and institutional challenges, particularly the macro-economic ones and policy constraints. Could you describe how these challenges and constraints are addressed in your vision?

**Swaniker:** The single biggest issue that ALG faces concerns the regulatory environment. The group's model is very disruptive and unconventional and so does not work with most regulatory frameworks. The idea of a university led by the students' needs rather than those of the professors; in which students choose what they will study; which offers blended learning; and which taps into a global network of mentors and peers, is disruptive in so many different ways. In seeking to overcome the regulatory hurdles, ALG has sought to operate in more innovative countries which allow it to operate in the way it does.

**Mahali:** Are there any other kinds of innovations and best practices in the higher education space that you would like people to hear about?

**Swaniker:** I think there are a number of innovations that should be adopted to improve higher education provision, including:

- Student-driven learning in line with the 10/20/70 rule which places the emphasis on practical experience. In other words, learning that is not just in the classroom;
- New forms of assessments, which are based less on exams and more on the production of projects and portfolios;
- Learning that focuses on problems that need solving instead of academic theory;
- Different forms of student finance;
- Measuring successes not on the basis of inputs but rather on the basis of outputs such as the number of jobs created, the employability of graduates, the number of entrepreneurs produced, and the number of lives that have been touched; and
- Holding universities accountable for the changes that they produce in society and the effectiveness of their deployment of the resources that they hold.