

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 Ernest Aryeetey

Interview conducted by Prof Crain Soudien on 28 February 2023.

Crain Soudien: What are the main innovations in the universities with which you are associated?

Ernest Aryeetey: Increasingly, African universities are beginning to understand and accept that they must compete with other universities in the rest of the world. They are starting to appreciate the fact that it is no longer acceptable to assert that; “We work with African standards as opposed to global standards.” They are therefore becoming more and more ambitious. Although this doesn’t mean they have become ambitious enough, they are certainly looking outside their own campuses.

In this regard, the role that technology plays in higher education has become a lot more prominent than it has ever been. The technology available for research, teaching and learning has changed significantly around the world in the past decade. Previously, African universities would not have paid much attention to that. Today, they are interested and are using their own resources to acquire some of this technology. They are investing in technology that allows for creative interaction between lecturers and students both physically and virtually. They have also invested in technology that enables researchers undertake fieldwork and promotes the accurate storage of data. It is encouraging that African universities recognise that technological developments around the world make higher education a lot more attractive and are willing to invest in it.

Universities on the continent are also increasingly willing to discuss governance on their campuses. In the past, governance, which was viewed as the prerogative of governments, was taken for granted. Today, acknowledgement of the evident relationship between universities’ performance

and how they are governed indicates that African universities are becoming increasingly engaged with their governance environment. They are more interested in how governance affects the students and the faculty and how it helps them achieve their objectives.

It has, therefore, become apparent that it is crucial to direct the mission of universities properly. The strategic plans of several universities that I have seen go beyond the usual clichés, offer a vision beyond what has typically been associated with African universities, which is a cause for optimism despite the impediments that continue to inhibit the realisation of such visions.

African universities are increasingly showing a keen interest in internationalization and are investing resources to enhance their institutions for international students and faculty. This growing interest in internationalization also reflects a desire for collaboration, which led to the establishment of the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), of which I am a representative. The formation of this alliance was driven by Vice-Chancellors who recognized the value of collaboration among African universities in addressing regional challenges. Therefore, it is important to give greater attention and conduct further research on the topics of internationalization and collaboration.

However, despite the focus on technology, innovative governance, and internationalization and collaboration, African universities continue to face significant challenges rooted in their historical context. It is crucial to pay more attention to the role of national politics in higher education and its impact on university performance. I have observed that universities that excel are often those with a high degree of autonomy in their management. Academic freedom appears to be a key driver of innovation in university management, and the lack of such freedom can hinder progress in governance.

Soudien: Can you provide examples of institutions undertaking teaching and learning innovations and engaging in internationalisation and collaboration?

Aryeetey: I served as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana for a period of six years. During my tenure, the university made consistent investments in technology to enhance engagement within the classroom and lecture theatre, as well as outside these spaces. The university placed significant emphasis on software development and improved its hardware infrastructure by installing fibre-optic cables across the campus in the early 2000s. Moreover, in recent times, other universities in Ghana, such as Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi and the University of Cape Coast, along with even smaller universities, have also made substantial investments in technology. Makerere University and the University of Nairobi have also made substantial infrastructure investments in the region. It is evident that universities are increasingly financing infrastructure development from their own funds rather than relying solely on external sources.

In terms of internationalization, Makerere University has become a popular destination for students from Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi. However, the University of Ghana used to admit a considerable number of Nigerian students until the Nigerian government imposed stricter

regulations. In this regard, it has become crucial for governments to facilitate the movement of students and faculty across the region.

When it comes to government interference in university administration, I am concerned when a Vice-Chancellor is required to seek permission from the office of the president or prime minister for travel purposes. Obtaining such permission can be a lengthy process, and official immigration restrictions can hinder the free movement of university leaders. This can also limit their ability to meet with potential funders or researchers, thereby impeding their management capabilities.

While there have been positive developments in terms of university investments, the influence exerted by national governments in academic programmes remains very worrying. It is concerning that governments are imposing student admission quotas without considering the available resources. It is equally disturbing that governments seek to influence faculty hiring processes. It would be a major cause for concern if the research agenda of universities were to be dictated by a ministry of education. While there have been notable improvements in some African universities, there are worrisome indications of bureaucratic interference led by politicians.

Soudien: Is such interference less of a problem at the universities in the African Research Universities Alliance?

Aryeetey: By and large, the ARUA universities enjoy far more latitude. As the flagship universities of their countries, they receive considerable support from national governments and other domestic institutions. But even these universities may not be completely free from overreaching governments.

Soudien: To what do you ascribe this greater latitude? The fact that there's a recognition on the part of the politicians that interference disables? Or is it due to the sheer assertiveness of Vice-Chancellors?

Aryeetey: The role of Vice-Chancellors holds significant importance; however, it is crucial to acknowledge the changing environment as well. Many African universities receive substantial funding from external sources, including other governments and domestic agencies. When there is considerable engagement with international and external donor institutions, the university is required to be accountable to a wide range of external stakeholders. This not only benefits governance but also discourages excessive interference from national governments. On the other hand, if a university is heavily reliant on its national government for funding, it becomes easier for the government to manipulate campus affairs.

Soudien: To what extent are key flagship or elite universities such as the University of Ghana and Makerere dependent on revenues from governments?

Aryeetey: In the case of African universities, a large portion of their income comes from national governments. The salaries of faculty, which comprise about 80% to 85% of the total budget, come from government sources. Therefore, the role of governments should not be underestimated.

However, there are instances where the government provides faculty salaries without interfering in day-to-day staffing decisions. Conversely, in other cases, the government seeks to influence appointments, such as professorships, department heads, and deans. Some universities even require the approval of the Ministry of Education for the appointment of faculty deans. While this is not the case among ARUA institutions, it is prevalent in many African universities.

Soudien: How have the new technologies promoted innovation in teaching and learning, and what has been their impact on the cultures of learning at universities?

Aryeetey: The impact of government involvement varies but has generally been positive. Most universities in the region are striving to democratize teaching by utilizing new technologies. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities invested in increasing bandwidth to enhance student access and have adopted new software, leading to increased interest from faculty members in utilizing these technologies for research purposes. There has also been an increase in the number of articles published in high-impact journals, largely due to the way these new technologies have facilitated the collection and processing of quality data.

In recent years, young African researchers have displayed a remarkable increase in their willingness to undertake bold projects independently, without relying solely on partnerships with European or American researchers. This shift in mindset has led to a surge in the number of African scholars taking the lead as Principal Investigators (PIs) and actively seeking collaboration with their peers from the global north. Consequently, there has been a significant rise in the number of young Early-Career Researchers in Africa applying for grants from international funders.

Soudien: Can you provide examples of ground-breaking research being pioneered by young African scholars?

Aryeetey: A notable example of this trend can be seen at the West African Centre for Cell Biology of Infectious Pathogens (WACCBIP) at the University of Ghana, where young biochemistry, public health, and medical researchers have gone beyond working on genome sequencing to also working more directly on vaccine development research with other ARUA units elsewhere.

Similarly, in the field of social sciences, young economists at the University of Ghana are increasingly focused on building networks to access grants from various foundations, including those in the United Kingdom (UK). As a result, the university has developed structures to support these researchers in their pursuit of funding opportunities.

One of the key factors contributing to the growing confidence of African scholars as researchers is the improved quality of available data. This improvement is a direct result of significant investments made in longitudinal and other studies over the years. Looking ahead, there is great potential for further enhancement in the quality and scale of research outputs from the region.

Soudien: Are there similar units to WACCBIP in other fields, including economics?

Aryeetey: There are some prominent ones in natural and applied sciences, as well as the social sciences. One such example is the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) based in Nairobi, which has been supporting the development of African economists for over three decades. Additionally, the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) in Nairobi aims to assist young social scientists in conducting relevant research.

While growth in the social sciences may not be as prominent as that of the natural and applied sciences, it has still been significant. Notably, the field of economics has seen a remarkable improvement in research quality and scope over the past 30 years. This can be attributed to enhanced data availability and a high standard of capacity building in the discipline, which has kept pace with theoretical and methodological advancements globally. As a result, young African researchers are now able to apply these new methods and approaches to local data, leading to research outcomes that were previously unimaginable.

Soudien: Is there a possibility that new fields in economics may be opened up by these young African scholars?

Aryeetey: Indeed, there is a wealth of new research being conducted in various fields, including behavioural economics. Young economists in Africa are progressively utilizing the abundance of new data to foster interdisciplinary collaborations with psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and even natural scientists. For instance, economists and climate scientists now have access to extensive data that enables them to address the challenges posed by climate change through joint efforts. In the past, interdisciplinary collaboration was more prevalent in Europe and North America, but it has currently become much easier for scholars to work across disciplines at African universities.

Soudien: This wave of growth and development challenges the dominant narrative that African universities are imitative, are derivative.

Aryeetey: And I think the prospects for the future are very bright.

Soudien: The process also seems to entail greater autonomy as African scholars look to their own resources and are weaned off foreign donor funding.

Aryeetey: I would not use the term "weaning off" as it implies a complete detachment from external resources, which are still necessary. However, it is important for African governments and universities to increasingly make use of their own resources alongside external funding. It is worth noting that a significant portion of recent infrastructural investment has been sourced domestically, with national governments primarily funding buildings and large-scale infrastructure projects. These investments are crucial as they provide the necessary resources such as suitable workspaces, laboratories, or offices, to conduct meaningful research. At the same time, external funding provided in partnership with universities in the region has been instrumental in expanding and improving the data available to social scientists, making it possible for young African researchers to undertake more sophisticated studies.

Considering this, the objective for African governments and universities should be to coordinate better and complement the support they receive from external sources in more appropriate ways. This will allow them to gradually reduce their reliance on external funding, with the long-term aim of supporting African universities in a manner like how governments and funders in the global north support their own institutions. Encouraging African philanthropists to invest in African research and higher education is particularly important in this regard.

Soudien: Are there any examples that come to mind of African entrepreneurs, philanthropists or corporations that have provided such funding?

Aryeetey: You will not find many instances of such collaboration between companies and universities outside of South Africa. For instance, the University of Pretoria has a highly regarded engineering program that receives significant support from South African firms. However, I have not observed similar collaborations in other African countries, despite the generous donations made by benefactors to specific causes at certain universities. Generally, philanthropy outside of South Africa lacks the organization and structure necessary to provide sustainable funding for research in a sustained and systematic manner.

Soudien: Against the background of change at African universities, have undergraduate curricula changed significantly in the past 15 years?

Aryeetey: Lecturers who deliver the programmes at most universities are responsible for determining the content and delivery of the curriculum. The university then assesses the lecturers based on the relevance of the material provided to students. This also includes considering whether the curriculum reflects the students' current environment.

When seeking feedback from students, the university tries to assess whether the material is relevant and current. However, I am not aware of universities dictating the specific content of the curriculum. Instead, they identify and support lecturers who update their teaching materials regularly to ensure they remain current and reflect the values of the society. While some lecturers may use outdated material, others actively seek new and relevant resources. Although the university does not directly decide the curriculum, it does have a responsibility to intervene if evaluations indicate that a lecturer is not meeting expectations and delivering outdated material.

Soudien: And that appraisal culture is well established?

Aryeetey: Most universities have embraced the concept of decolonisation, which often leads to positive outcomes, although not always. The aim of decolonisation is to reshape curricula and the efforts of lecturers in a way that aligns with students' interests, values, and the historical and socio-economic context of each specific location. The University of Ghana, for instance, recently organized seminars and lectures on decolonisation, which were met with great enthusiasm. What was interesting about it was that the discussions that emerged from this event differed significantly from those held in other places, for example in South Africa, on the same topic. Therefore, it is

crucial for universities to provide their lecturers with the freedom to explore subjects that are relevant and of interest to their students and to their own research.

Soudien: Most of the ARUA institutions teach in English. How many of them are exploring teaching in indigenous vernaculars?

Aryeetey: I have no knowledge of any ARUA institutions currently investigating teaching in indigenous languages. Nevertheless, there are numerous establishments, particularly in Ghana, that are advocating for multilingualism. These institutions provide students who are taught in English the chance to learn additional languages, such as French or Spanish, as well as local languages. An example is the Language Centre at the University of Ghana, which was initially established to teach local languages to international students and faculty members who were interested. However, it has now gained popularity among Ghanaians from different ethnic backgrounds and who are eager to learn other Ghanaian languages.

I believe it is important for Africans, regardless of their location, to have the ability to speak multiple languages and, where possible, be provided with opportunities to learn different languages. By learning different languages, individuals become more versatile and adaptable across various borders and cultures. Therefore, it would be beneficial for Ghanaian students studying in South Africa to have the chance to learn Xhosa or other local languages, enabling them to understand and embrace the diverse cultures within the host country. Similarly, I would expect South African students studying in Ghana to take an interest in the many Ghanaian languages.