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 Ms Shanen Ganapathee
Interview conducted by Prof Ibrahim Oanda on 2 June 2021

Ibrahim Oanda: Could you speak briefly about yourself and your connection to higher education?

Shanen Ganapathee: I was awarded a Mastercard Foundation scholarship and left my home in Mauritius to study abroad. After graduating, a few opportunities came my way, one of which would have seen me stay in the United States (US). But I wanted to return to the continent and find a way of giving back. I had previously worked as an intern at the African Leadership University (ALU) campus in Mauritius and when an opportunity arose to join the faculty and the new campus that ALU was opening in Rwanda, I took it. The prospect was doubly exciting because if offered an opportunity to be in a start-up environment. The work entailed designing and delivering a higher education curriculum and a number of extracurricular experiences to a pan-African group of students. I also worked briefly on a programme preparing graduates for jobs, which was established by Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator in Kigali.

Oanda: Are you still affiliated with the African Leadership University?

Ganapathee: No, I subsequently left. At present, I am working to promote human rights and access to sexual and reproductive health services for young people around the world, which I see as an aspect of my engagement in empowering young people and addressing their wellbeing in a holistic way alongside my earlier work in the fields of university education and graduate employment.

Oanda: What is your view of the role of the university?
Ganapathee: I think there are two conflicting aspects of the university's role. Although I understand the importance of finding employment for youth and the dignity that jobs can bring to young people's lives, I do not think the role of university is strictly to

prepare students for work. Access to education is a human right; and a quality education at university level should not just be about making people ready for the workforce. It should be about giving people the chance to become themselves and express themselves, helping them shape their preferences, needs and desires for the future. In other words, the university should support the young on their journey to discovering where they fit in the world and identifying their purpose – in other words, what they can do with the limited amount of time allotted them in this life.

In this regard and notwithstanding the great value of the Mastercard Foundation's Young Africa Works strategy in helping to provide young people with dignified, fulfilling work, I think that the notion of the university as a place which prepares students for jobs can be at odds with the idea of education as a force for liberation and the promotion of social justice. I really think that the emphasis in higher education should be on achieving a balance between learning how to operate effectively within an existing system that we inherited and are a part of, but should push students to question the nature of the system, with a view to changing it. However, I would say that at present, the emphasis is generally on how to succeed as a part of the system without questioning it.

The university in Africa also has an important role to play in local knowledge creation. The field of anthropology for instance, is steeped in racism and untruths, such as, for example, in its portrayal of Africans as "backwards". To a large extent, I think this field evolved the way it did because the people who were being studied as dehumanized subjects never had a say. So, I think higher education on the continent has a role in reclaiming such spaces and narratives and generating knowledge produced by Africans so that such untruths are never again allowed to persist.

Oanda: Universities in Africa have been criticised for moving from educating the whole person to a narrow focus on employability, which has led to insufficient investment in the humanities. What does this tell us about the future of the university in Africa?

Ganapathee: To an extent I understand the shift away from the humanities given how African governments have focussed on investing in science and technology as a means of fixing the immediate practical problems faced by the continent. So, students are encouraged to take up STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects and to be trained as engineers or doctors or biologists or agricultural scientists so that they can address, say, the problem of diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) or HIV/AIDS, or help to improve crop yields. Such have become the immediate, short-term priorities for investment in higher education.

However, the focus on providing this type of solutions and creating the kinds of employees that the market requires is quite a short-term approach and one which prioritises the urgent over the important in terms of national development. For example, an exclusive focus on producing artificial intelligence technicians may lead to only a small number of people being trained to develop the necessary ethical, policy-making and regulatory frameworks for the emerging new technology.

There is also a tendency among African universities to emulate the higher education model in the so-called "developed" countries, such as the US, which I consider to be a mistake given, for example, the low quality and access of individuals to public

healthcare, high levels of economic inequality and great incidence of aggressive capitalism-related issues in the country. In this respect, although the US is economically strong, I do not think it should serve as a model for African development if we want to develop in a holistic way which actually values human lives.

Oanda: From a society-centred and sustainable-development perspective (as embodied by the sustainable development goals [SDGs] adopted by the United Nations [UN] in 2015), should there be a contradiction between educating for employability and educating a whole person? Is there not a way of marrying the two, instead of focusing on one aspect only?

Ganapathee: I agree, there is theoretically no need for such a dichotomy. However, the reality is that the funding is being directed at training for work rather than, say, supporting theater courses that help young people express themselves and tap into their creativity. Such prioritisation clearly indicates the aspect of higher education that governments actually value. So, the tension, the dichotomy arises due to skewed funding and investment and how this sets the priorities, including in relation to the SDGs.

There is also the issue of how the criteria for the international university rankings incentivise higher education institutions to prioritise particular aspects of their governance and mission, for example, in relation to research outputs or student-to-faculty ratios. Conversely, if the rankings do not measure or reward, for example, support for human rights or environmental activism or investment in the humanities, then there is no incentive to invest in these aspects of a university's role. Given how much universities typically are ranking-motivated, there is a need to establish a new set of criteria and/or new rankings for measuring the performance of universities, which could incentivize them to perform on metrics with a more conscious social impact.

Oanda: How relevant are African universities to the social and economic contexts in which they operate? Should they be looking to change the way in which they relate to their contexts?

Ganapathee: Education has been described as the great equaliser, but cycles of privilege and underprivilege persist across generations. For example, as an undergraduate from a family background where neither of my parents graduated high school, there were a number of life skills that I had great difficulty acquiring compared with my more privileged peers. For instance, my college peers whose families were wealthier somehow naturally knew how to manage their money and could save with ease, while I struggled to budget and was unable to save even a single dollar from my scholarship stipend for years, which made me feel so defeated. The reality was that I had not grown up around money and did not have as much exposure to concepts like budgeting, saving and investing; and even after I graduated, it took me a couple of years to learn how to make a proper budget and manage my money properly.

In relation to this issue of privilege, there is also the broader matter of the capitalist system under which we all live; and how this places a financial value on people's time in ways that can prevent them from pursuing their passion. For example, when I graduated from university, I wanted to continue studying and undertake my PhD but I was worried about the low wages and my lack of savings. So I entered the job market in order earn

money instead. However, the pros and cons of capitalism as a system that has been created and maintained by people in leadership, are not things that get taught at university, unless you are studying economics – although they should be, given the system's significant impacts on our everyday lives.

Oanda: In seeking to address inequality, part of the ethos of Mastercard's intervention is that it may uplift communities by offering social capital in the form of scholarships to local pupils who perform well at school – the idea being that these scholars will, in some way, find a way to give back to their communities although there is no obligation to do so. How effective do you think this methodology is in redressing the generational inequalities to which you have referred?

Ganapathee: I am so grateful for what this programme has done for me. It has opened doors I never thought possible. I also understand its theory of change – that is, the idea that, by funding the education of young people with a desire for social change, they'll empower them to be able to uplift others, who, in turn, will uplift others, and so on, exponentially. In this way, the programme does have some equalising impact. For example, in my case, every job I have undertaken so far has somewhat entailed the theme of addressing and seeking to remedy policies that repress young people.

However, the programme is a model that is predicated on the capability of individuals to surmount great obstacles and, in this respect, fails to address the immense pressures that its beneficiaries face. There is the pressure to conform and become good employees, able to generate income to support one's family for instance. It's also harder to take risks when there is no safety nets of generational wealth.

An alternative or complementary approach, given the amount of money, power and influence at its disposal, would be for the Foundation to try and shape entire systems instead. In this regard, work at the individual level should also be accompanied by advocacy. For example, in my present line of work, it is acknowledged that the efforts to train young people and equip them with the appropriate resources to advocate for their sexual and reproductive health and rights must take place within the context of a larger campaign to influence governments to unlock their rights. Otherwise, these young people are being poorly served with messaging that they can have agency over their future in extremely unfriendly policy contexts which squash their rights. They are being empowered but can only do so much in the context of a policy environment that prevents them from exercising their autonomy.

In relation to higher education, a comparable challenge for universities would be not only to provide young people with the kind of education that allows them to advance themselves, but also to pursue a larger systemic change under which their graduates can flourish and realise the potential of the education and the opportunity for self-development that they have been given.

Oanda: How would you address the issue of access in relation to this vision for the university? For example, it has been shown that massification of higher education in Africa, while increasing the numbers of those accessing university has also been accompanied by significant inequalities in terms of the kinds of access that have been created.

Ganapathee: I suppose that in order to give access to as many people as possible, the cost of education must be low. However, it is also argued that as the costs decrease so does the quality of the education. Accordingly, the provision of mass high-quality education poses a significant challenge.

In this regard, I think the turn to online under the national lockdowns imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic illustrated how the cost of education may be reduced once the expense of occupying and using physical spaces is eliminated. However, the use of the online medium also created inequity, notwithstanding the deployment of asynchronous teaching and learning, as a result of unequal access to high-speed internet, particularly in remote areas.

Oanda: Part of the problem is that the ways in which pupils compete for access tend to privilege those from the middle and the high socio-economic groups who have been well-prepared to pass the relevant examinations, and disadvantages children from lower socio-economic groups – which dynamic has the larger effect of deepening generational inequalities.

In relation to taking higher education online, there is a sociological argument that this deprives students from lower socio-economic groups of forms of socialisation in the ways of the middle classes that can only take place in person when the individual is present at the institution.

There is also an issue of access around how technical and vocational higher education has historically been offered to pupils from the lower socio-economic groups, while their middle-class peers tend to go to university – which has created a feeling among those attending vocational schools that they have just been dumped there.

Ganapathee: These points put me in mind of the importance of redistributing power in the decision-making processes around how higher education may be reshaped. At present, the process seems to be one in which university administrators, researchers and senior government officials wrestle with these problems, trying to solve them on behalf of the "beneficiaries". However, another approach would be to deploy participatory decision-making in much the same way that the organisation at which I am presently working deploys participatory grant-making. Unlike the old process, which involved a team at the organisation reviewing project-funding applications and deciding which ones to support, participatory grant-making allows for the proposals to be anonymised and sent out for review to the other projects applying for a grant. So, the prospective grantees literally assess one another and decide which proposals are most deserving of funding. In other words, problems can be solved by trusting that the people concerned know what is right for them.

In this regard, instead of the Ministry of Education of a country centralising the process of curriculum development so that it decides what will go into every school, students could be engaged on what they think should be taught and local or regional curricula may be designed accordingly. Similarly, local communities and the public may be brought together to consider this issue of access which has challenged administrators for years. In other words, rather than bringing ready-made solutions to communities,

these communities should be given the problems and invited to offer their own solutions. So, I would push for an approach that devolves power to the people, promoting communal participation in decision-making.

Oanda: There have been significant efforts to improve the coordination of philanthropy in support of higher education in Africa, including in relation to the creation of public-private partnerships by national treasuries. Some universities have established new facilities in tandem with private partners. What do you think about this trend? Is it something that should be encouraged? Does it offer a solution to the problems of funding and access faced by African universities, or will it create more problems?

Ganapathee: In my line of work, there is close collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. However, I find it dangerous that this one white man based in the US has so much money (10 or 20 times a country's budget) and power that he can influence and shape entire governments' policy priorities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once made the point that there is always a danger to the single story. Similarly, there is always danger when too few people are making decisions. So, the ability of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to leverage its funding clout so that it effectively sets the priorities for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even entire nations, is not right; and is a recipe for disaster given how remote such decision-making can be from the interests of the local communities affected.

By contrast, MacKenzie Scott, who was previously married to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, is a philanthropist who has shown that she trusts the decision-making process of the non-profit organisations (NPOs) on the ground, acknowledging their expertise in relation to, for example, climate change or family planning or pedagogy or any other field within which they operate. She provides funds to support the core operations of the various organisations she backs, allowing them to implement whichever programmes they believe are appropriate. I support this kind of unrestricted no-strings-attached funding which offers locally-rooted people the opportunity to determine the agenda.

Notwithstanding the argument that it can be difficult to forge consensus when decision-making is decentralized, it is clear that such an approach can be effective and that the present dominant systems of governance can change, as was shown by the speed with which a range of responses were mounted to address the Covid-19 pandemic. In other words, it is just a matter of priorities. However, there are power dynamics which can inhibit popular pressure for change, such as when national governments are unable to resist the pressure placed on them by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) because of their large historical debts.

Oanda: What kind of support and mentorship should be provided at universities to equip students to succeed at these institutions without losing their social identities?

Ganapathee: I am not sure that the goal should be to build institutions which merely seek to make students comfortable. They should experience healthy challenges. There is a pedagogic theory which posits that the most learning takes place in the area just outside the comfort zone– zone of proximal development– but before the point is reached where what is taught becomes too much of a stretch. This is not to say that higher education institutions should not make every effort to ensure that they are safe

spaces protecting students from violation on the basis of their gender identity, sexual orientation or other differences. Rather the idea being proposed is that universities should be places where students' existing preconceived notions and beliefs, which may be derived from their upbringing, should be open to challenge so that a critical discourse is generated. In my own experience as a student, I learnt the most when the opinions I expressed in class were questioned in constructive ways. So, there is a fine balance that needs to be struck between protecting students' rights and ensuring their safety, and providing a space that challenges them to grow.

At an individual level, this requires teachers who can be brutally honest with their students, but who express this radical candour out of care for the students as part of a pedagogic mission to help them grow. Unfortunately, however, it is often the case that the teachers who are brutally honest lack care; or that the teachers who care fail to challenge their students.

Oanda: What is your view on the issue of integrating indigenous knowledge and the related drive to decolonise universities?

Ganapathee: My basic belief is that education is about liberation; and I do not think that there can be liberation in Africa without addressing history. For example, the vestiges of colonialism persist in my country, Mauritius as I have learnt over time. However, I was never taught about this at school, although I wish I had been.

In such a context, there is no possibility of the continent just moving on, as some urge, unless the past is reconciled. So, for instance, Germany has apologised to Namibia for its role in the attempted genocide of the Herero and Nama people in the first decade of the 20th century. This a genocide that only took place a few generations ago – so, the cycle of inequity produced by such violence and oppression persists even if an apology is given. It will take more than apologies to fix the damage done.

There is a need to decentre Euro-centric perspectives, which is a key goal of decolonisation. The importance of such efforts may be illustrated by considering the case of Mauritius once more. In contrast to other parts of the continent, there are no native people on our island; everybody is an immigrant or the descendant of an immigrant. At the same time, the families of the white settlers control most of the wealth although they are in the minority in terms of numbers. This means that a young person like me has to work hard to own a home; to own a piece of land; and to build a life. In this context, most of the young people I know are working for white-owned organisations and using their salaries to pay off mortgages issued by white-owned banking institutions. In other words, in their quest for a home – for a place where they can lay their bones and be safe – their labour and the money they earn for it belongs to the white minority. So, now, over 50 years since independence was won in 1968, young people in Mauritius continue to encounter the vestiges of the country's colonial past and experience the need to reverse the effects of this past, indicating the importance of the idea of decolonisation.

British colonial masters deployed the strategy of divide and conquer, turning those under their control against each other, as happened in India, leading to the partition with Pakistan. Similarly, the groups of people from different parts of the world, including

India, China and Madagascar, who make up the majority of the population of Mauritius are divided. In response, however, decolonisation efforts would unite people against neo-colonialism and racism. Populations are no longer split into "these people" and "those people" but rather can come together to address inequity, including by reclaiming sovereignty over their land. In Mauritius, unity among the groups would lead to a conversation about how it is unfair that a minority of people own 80% of the country.

In this context, the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement was largely due to the way in which it united people across the Diaspora and in Africa, creating solidarity and also considerable fear among those in power who could no longer maintain the status quo. When people unite in this way with a cause and a demand for change, then change happens. For example, in the US, one result was that a lot more philanthropic funding was directed at supporting black-owned businesses, as well as collectives led by young black women, and so on.

Oanda: It is argued that the influence and power of Western thinking in shaping societies in Africa and elsewhere has been so great that, in the absence of any realistic prospect of an alternative reality being constructed, the notion of decolonisation is fanciful. Is this a concern that should be addressed in seeking to transform universities in Africa?

Ganapathee: I do not think that the decolonisation movement aims to reject Western thinking outright but rather its supremacy. The goal is to decentre it and to acknowledge that other philosophies also are important and of value as part of the academic discourse. Western thinking places great emphasis on dichotomies: mind and body duality; one thing or the other. Which is not necessarily the case under other forms of thinking. For example, I recently read an article describing how the Spanish conquistadors in Latin America insisted that the Aztecs should worship their Christian God; and how the Aztecs were willing to acknowledge the existence of this God alongside their own, their thinking being "because your God is real does not mean mine is not". In other words, they practised dialectic thinking. It does not have to be all or nothing, like a zero-sum game, although this tends to be the Western dichotomous logic: "Only my God", or "My views over everybody else's".

The Aztecs also had a valuable perspective on time which they viewed as a cyclical rather than a linear phenomenon. Adopting such a view rather than a linear approach to time could lead to more people taking greater care of the planet.

So, I think there is great power and value in new forms of thinking – particularly as an alternative to this zero-sum-game kind of thinking which has produced our present capitalist societies – which, it has been shown, are clearly not the answer.

Oanda: In the context of the crucial role played by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) under lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an emerging narrative that the future of higher education and how it will be organised cannot be imagined without reference to these technologies. How practicable is the deployment of such technologies in Africa? Will they form an inescapable part of the higher education landscape on the continent?

Ganapathee: In research on ICTs, the term "digital natives" is often used to refer to millennials, as if we were all born digital, when, in fact, most of us on the continent went to schools which used blackboards. The study of ICTs also requires African perspectives. The fact is that insofar as technology emanates from an unequal society it can only ever mirror existing inequities; it won't correct them necessarily. For example, there was a YouTube video which went viral that showed how automatic soap dispensers in the United States failed to recognise darker skin tones. Similarly, if the datasets that are fed into computers to foster machine learning are derived from mainly white populations, then the algorithms that will be produced will not necessarily address and solve the problems faced by other populations. So, ICTs and new technologies in and of themselves are not necessarily the answer; their capacity to produce solutions depends on the human intentionality shaping their use.

The other issue is that the kind of exponential growth in the use and power of the new technologies– which can be modeled by Moore's Law– is so great that it outstrips human capacity either to envisage or govern the results. Who knows, perhaps many people will have a chip implanted in their brain as the most effective form of communication within 20 years. Accordingly, it's hard to predict the kinds of educational technology platforms that may be being employed in 10 years' time; or the extent to which and how they may penetrate the market in Africa, and their relevance to the continent's development needs.

Oanda: And will the way in which they are deployed be to Africa's advantage or will it allow another kind of exploitation, as has happened previously with the introduction of new economic modes and technologies?

Beyond changing the international university ranking to make them a truer measure of the ways in which African higher education institutions may be relevant to the development imperatives of their societies and economies, do you think there is a way in which universities in Africa can be made more agile in how they respond to the changes that are taking place in the world? Is there a way in which they may become part of a new narrative: one in which African universities are no longer examples of the global crisis in higher education writ large but are promoted as examples of how this crisis may be overcome?

Ganapathee: I do not think universities will ever be able to change fast enough to accommodate the present pace of change. In order to do so, there would have to be rapid decision-making by small executives empowered to bypass institutional policy-making.

In this regard, instead of seeking continually to change to accommodate what is happening outside the campus gates, which is something universities have repeatedly failed to do, they would be better advised to focus on their core educational competencies, which have broadly remained unchanged. In particular, they should prioritise their capacity to promote critical thinking, which is a skill-set that will likely continue to be in demand for decades to come. In this regard, they should not seek to adopt the role of content experts, constantly updating the curriculum and trying to share the latest knowledge with the students. A role which anyway can be almost impossible to undertake given the sheer amount of knowledge being generated and the speed with which it is disseminated online, as was shown by the plethora of research papers that

were being published daily on the internet in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather the focus should be on equipping students with the capabilities to think critically; to seek knowledge for themselves; and to be thoughtful about the kinds of information they source – for example, by learning to detect fake news. Such capacity for critical thinking would represent a valuable asset that they could take into the world.

There is also the issue of whether universities should be places for equipping students with technical skills, such as through a computer science degree, given that such skills could quite readily be provided by future employers and acquired on the job. In this regard, an apprenticeship model under which people are taught particular skills as the need for them arises – that is, some form of just-in-time learning – would make more sense and relieve the pressure on universities. Under such a model, universities would be responsible for equipping their graduates with critical thinking skills, as well as a other core aptitudes, and the employers would fill in the blanks with training and take responsibility for teaching their recruits how to be good at the job they join. In order to fulfil this function, universities will need to remain places where there is a free flow of ideas and intellectual debate.

Oanda: It has been suggested that universities should once again focus on teaching the social sciences and humanities, rather than seeking to instil the kinds of skills that are supposed to make their graduates more employable.

Ganapathee: I completely agree. Is it not the job of the employer to teach the skills for employability? After all, it is the employer who profits from exploiting skilled labour. Why should some other institution be expected to teach those who will be their employees and bear the cost of that? Why should the government subsidise the costs of higher education so that companies may profit? I don't believe in higher education as a pipeline to employability only. It does a disservice to the higher education as an institution to reduce it to this.

Oanda: Are there any particular higher education innovations that you have encountered from which universities may learn in their efforts to change?

Ganapathee: Although this is not a ground-breaking position, my view is that lectures are ineffective as a tool for learning. They are predicated on the notion that there are universal education benefits to be derived from a form of pedagogy under which students are expected to acquire knowledge passively by listening to someone else talk. However, all students are different – and they cannot all learn in this way.

A more transformative approach would be for academics to teach students in a differentiated way in relatively small tutorial groups or in a seminar setting at which papers are presented and discussed. Of course, low student-to-teacher ratios can be relatively expensive, so the key issue is how the benefits of such an approach may be generated more cheaply

Oanda: Is there anything else that has not been covered which you would like to discuss?

Ganapathee: Universities may be transformed by adopting a human rights-based rather than evidence-based approach to caring for their students. It is fundamental that

students deserve and have a right to high quality higher education that is holistic. Let's say for example, that research shows that mental health services are beneficial to students. This is of secondary importance, welcome as such findings may be. Universities should already at baseline be making every effort to ensure students can have equitable access to education, without discrimination and organically it makes sense that mental health services form part of this vision.

Universities should also consider adopting more participatory processes in addressing the challenges they face. Administrators and faculty may find that many of the problems they encounter may be resolved through a more community-based approach, under which students are no longer engaged merely as beneficiaries of a particular programme but also as co-creators of the initiatives from which they are supposed to derive benefit.

It is also important to emphasise that education can be used for liberation, but also for oppression. For example, if an institution of learning does not want its student to learn about colonisation in their country or other darker aspects of their history, it is not producing education for liberation. In this regard, everyone working in the sphere of higher education must consider how they are exercising their individual power, and whether the decisions they are taking move the endeavour closer to or further from liberation. At the same time, there are the ways in which power is exercised at the systemic level that can shape institutional priorities regardless of individual efforts. In this context, one important way of transforming education in a progressive way is to try and shift the decision-making power into the hands of the young people who are supposed to be its beneficiaries.