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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.

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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 Dr James Otieno Jowi
Interview conducted by Prof Crain Soudien and Prof Thierry Luescher on 14 February 2023

Crain Soudien: In the eastern African context, could you talk about current best practices in relation to programme and qualifications mix; pedagogical innovations; curriculum innovations; the ways in which institutions are innovating around home-languages and languages of instruction; and innovations in relation to digitisation, fourth industrial revolution (4IR) instructional support and co-curricular transition support?

James Jowi: I will mainly be making my contribution from my current perspective in the region as the head of the education portfolio of the East African Community (EAC) over the past five years. In addition, I founded and helped to lead the African Network for Internationalisation of Education (ANIE); and am affiliated and teach at the Faculty of Education at Moi University in Kenya.

Universities have mushroomed across eastern Africa in recent years as the number of students has risen rapidly, outpacing growth in the numbers of academic staff. Initially, the new public-owned institutions were established in a differentiated way, focussing on specific fields such as technology, agriculture or teacher training – but increasingly, they have evolved as comprehensive universities, including schools of medicine and law. So, for example, the original purpose of Moi University, which was established in a rural area, has been overtaken as a variety of academic programmes

have been added to the mix, with the result that the institution lacks focus in terms of its public mission. The similar nature of the courses offered across public universities in the region means that there is little to choose among them, which may account for the relative lack of student and academic mobility across higher education institutions in eastern Africa.

Meanwhile, a number of centres of excellence offering specialist training that may not be available elsewhere in the region have been established with the aim of addressing capacity deficits in eastern Africa and stemming its brain drain. The establishment of these centres represents a significant development in the higher education sector. In addition, there has been a drive to promote mutual recognition of qualifications within the region, which has entailed negotiations around benchmarking quality standards for various profession with the aim of facilitating the movement of students, graduates and staff within the EAC.

Soudien: Tell us about the centres of excellence.

Jowi: Some of these centres of excellence are supported by the World Bank, and some are supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). A number of them provide high-level training and capacity-building for research in the various fields, including in health; information and communications technologies (ICTs); environmental issues; technical and vocational education and training (TVET); engineering; and entrepreneurship. The centres of excellence on health include one on kidney research in Nairobi; there is one concerned with heart diseases in Uganda; and there is one on nutrition being established in Burundi. There are also centres focused on agriculture, for example, at Egerton University in Kenya; and a number focussed on technical and vocational training including one at Moi University providing training for the textile sector. Meanwhile, particular countries are taking the lead in relation to capacity-building in key sectors which have been identified as priorities for development. So, Rwanda is taking the lead on ICTs; Kenya is taking the lead on automotive manufacture; and Tanzania is taking a lead in relation to the blue economy.

The establishment of these centres of excellence in tandem with the drive to promote mutual recognition of qualifications across eastern Africa, as well as the provision of scholarships to enable students to travel and study in neighbouring countries, has fostered mobility in the region. Now, Kenyan students commonly study in Uganda and vice versa, which represents a shift from the days when students in the region only conceived of studying abroad in terms of finding a university place in Europe, the United States (US) or South Africa.

In relation to pedagogical innovations, there is great concern that professors and lecturers have not embraced the transformations in pedagogy and in their fields, in addition to the broader opportunities offered by digitalisation.. Such practices fail to address the actual challenges that society is facing and to which universities need to be responsive to. Meanwhile, massification has produced major workloads for teachers who may have hundreds of students in their classes – and may be required to mark hundreds of scripts with questions and answers derived from a range of standard texts. The implication of this is that academic staff at universities do not have adequate

time for research and knowledge generation. In this context, new approaches to learning could be adopted including helping students to source much of the content and knowledge that is required for their studies online.

So, there is great potential for pedagogical innovations in relation to how lessons are delivered and knowledge is imparted and in relation to how students are evaluated. In this context, the shift to embracing the new technologies necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic represented a major opportunity that has not been fully grasped by the universities. Although the training for academics in how to deliver content via digital technologies was rushed and led to inadequate implementation, the move to online learning was relatively straightforward for students, who are already technologically aware. Such awareness may help the higher education institutions to address some of the pedagogical challenges presented by massification. However, since the end of the pandemic, the adoption of digital technologies in the sector seems to be moving at a rather slow pace and, in some cases, has even been reversed.

Soudien: That's a really important characterisation of the whole system. Within this are there individuals who are doing things differently?

Jowi: The emergence of digitalisation and new technologies has been greeted with increasing enthusiasm among several African academics and researchers, who are now more prepared to work, access training and research opportunities, and meet online. In particular, young African scholars can now participate in international academic debates through various online platforms. Participation in such forums would have otherwise been unaffordable due to the cost of travel. These developments have also fostered enhanced collaboration and engagement among African scholars and between them and institutions globally.

Generally, the higher education sector has been relatively slow in deploying the new technologies to support its main activities, such as teaching, learning and research. Universities seem to be lagging behind in this, compared with other segments of society, including the business and finance sectors. Even small businesses have integrated the new technologies faster than universities. In fact, notwithstanding the cost of bandwidth and infrastructure, universities should have the ability to deploy the new technologies more effectively, particularly given the digital know-how of students.

Soudien: Are there any innovative forms of learning assessment being undertaken?

Jowi: In this regard, a lot of the transformation is taking place especially at the lower levels of learning. For example, Kenya started to implement competency-based learning in schools about five years ago – and this approach requires more dynamic forms of assessment than are deployed in higher education. This should trigger new forms of assessment at universities as the cohorts of pupils who have learnt and been assessed in these new ways enter higher education.

Meanwhile, the private universities, which are less-resourced and perhaps more agile than the bigger public universities, appeared to have adapted quite quickly to the new technologies and have

introduced new forms of online assessment. Meanwhile, their public counterparts continue to assess via pen-and-paper examinations undertaken in large halls, which are then marked by hand. The only time that process links with a computer is when the marks from student assessments are uploaded. So, there is a need to disrupt the present old-school system of assessment, which would entail training academic staff to engage with teaching, learning and assessment in new digital ways, as well as, perhaps, appointing experts who could promote and implement digitalisation of processes.

Soudien: And is it the same in all the disciplines?

Jowi: In general, yes. For example, the deployment of the digital technologies in the science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM) subjects was quite fraught, with academics questioning whether engineers could be trained online, and whether practical laboratory work and internships could be undertaken and assessed virtually.

Soudien: So, things haven't changed that much in the past 20 years?

Jowi: Yes and no. A key difference now is the extent and potential of the opportunities on offer, which have been realised in significant and highly productive ways by the private universities and by research institutions outside the university sector, although not by the public universities. Research productivity especially in the public universities has also grown tremendously. In addition there are concerted efforts to enhance training of a new generation of academics and researchers especially in areas where there have been capacity deficits.

Soudien: But those research institutions don't really engage in teaching and learning?

Jowi: In general no, although some do provide training, including some of the centres of excellence, that have been established in eastern Africa (although the certification awarded by these institutions is offered in collaboration with universities). They have mainly been established to strengthen research capacities including by developing a critical mass of young qualified researchers and academics.

Soudien: Could you talk a little about the availability of research materials and texts in libraries and online in eastern Africa?

Jowi: The new technologies have greatly expanded access to relevant academic materials and content from a diversity of sources for both lecturers and students. At the same time, students can only access the information that they seek if they know where to look, notwithstanding the various mobile-phone applications at their disposal. In addition, there needs to be enhanced coordination of data so that information on key topics that is relevant to the academic studies at hand can be more readily found in one place, instead of being scattered. To this end, libraries across the continent could collaborate to share their resources and facilitate access to these, with the research and education system in South Africa, which is relatively strong, playing a leading role in such efforts.

Soudien: Are lecturers prescribing their own textbooks in their classes? Where do the textbooks come from?

Jowi: Lecturers can prescribe textbooks that they have produced. In general, most lecturers reference their PhD dissertations or any published papers that they have produced. But the vast majority of the content on reading lists consists of Western literature.

In this regard, a recent study found that research papers from the global south were being viewed as sub-standard because they were mainly published in what are called local journals which are not usually referenced in international literature. This discrimination fails to acknowledge the value of citing local case studies in a paper on an African situation and also points to a double standard – authors in other parts of the world are not necessarily expected to cite works from Africa for their work to be considered "international".

Similarly, curriculum planners assume that content by international authors should be included in academic courses in order to assure the quality of these programmes, which implicitly undervalues the knowledge contribution that may be made by local scholarship to the subject being taught.

Thierry Luescher: Student political protests in South Africa around decolonising the curriculum have challenged the white, male nature of the content being taught. In a similar vein, as an African scholar, you seem to be quite critical about the dominant ways in which international legitimacy in relation to curricula and research is being framed. Is there any kind of a groundswell around this issue? Is there a view that academia in Africa should be more patriotic, nationalist and mercantilist about its own trade in knowledge?

Jowi: African academics can adopt this position, but they are not the gatekeepers, in large part because there are few credible African outlets for the publication of research, which leaves the power and the kudos in the hands of the so-called "international journals" – which is a situation that only further reinforces their position as the journals of record within academia.

In response to this predicament, the present commitment by a number of universities on the continent to develop the capacities of the next generation of African scholars and researchers should be accompanied by the establishment of support systems and opportunities that can acknowledge and promote the value of the Africa-based knowledge being produced. So, for example, there should be a drive to develop strong, sustainable African journals in a number of thematic and subject areas which would be able to profile the work of the young scholars and promote it internationally. In the absence of such journals, publication of the research produced by these scholars would continue to depend on and be shaped by the viewpoints of the editors of external journals.

Luescher: At present, there are hundreds of African journals, but many of them restrict access to their content. Whereas the large international academic publishers, such as Routledge and Taylor &

Francis, promise greater accessibility and reach, which affords them credibility and legitimacy. Turning to the curriculum debate, could you describe the main shifts that are taking place?

Jowi: There is a major focus on developing STEM, digital, agriculture and health programmes on the continent, which has been supported by significant funding from Europe and the US. However, the promotion of these subjects, which has been largely driven by an instrumental approach to job creation, has been accompanied by austerity in the funding of social science programmes. This has led to competition among the social sciences for funding, with some programmes being sacrificed for others. This has also led to an erosion of the value attached to the social sciences and the crucial contributions that they can make to African lives and development.

Soudien: So, has dependence on donor funding limited the scope for innovation? Are African stakeholders only able to innovate in ways prescribed by external funders; or could they rather look to their own resources and innovate in ways that are more self-reliant?

Jowi: Donor dependence has become quite commonplace. For example, a recent initiative to support African students in their academic writing was supported by a group of universities from the US, although an alternative approach would be for a number of universities in South Africa and eastern Africa to collaborate to establish academic writing centres in their own regions, thus fostering new forms of networking among students at these places. Similarly, in the field of start-ups, Swiss funding has been made available in support of the development of innovative technologies in Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa, although Africa's own private and industrial sectors could afford to be leading the investment in this area instead.

In this respect, the problem seems to be one of coordination and organisation and adopting a strategic outlook to promoting regional and African interests. So, for example, at a recent meeting with US representatives in Pretoria, the vice-chancellors of South African universities presented their various institutional priorities in a relatively uncoordinated way in the absence of any meaningful representation from the African Union (AU), regional economic communities (RECs) or the Association of African Universities.

Soudien: Could you talk about some of the opportunities for developing Kiswahili in the region?

Jowi: Kiswahili is one of the most widely spoken African languages. It is spoken in most of eastern Africa and now increasingly in Central Africa and parts of southern Africa. It has been very important for the political emancipation of the region. Accordingly, I participated in developing the documents on the basis of which the summit of EAC heads of state adopted Kiswahili as an official language for the region given that it constitutes a lingua franca. The idea being that parliamentary debates and the EAC's communications should be conducted in Kiswahili, which is understood by most people in eastern Africa, rather than in French or English, thus promoting the regional integration agenda at a popular level.

The summit established the East African Kiswahili Commission to coordinate the development and implementation of Kiswahili as a language of wider communication and official language of the EAC.

The commission works with a number of stakeholders to develop the language and undertake research. It has overseen the provision of translation services at statutory meetings of the EAC; it is developing language policies for the region; and it has translated key documents, such as the EAC treaty and other founding documents of the community, into Kiswahili. It also collaborates with universities, most of which have Kiswahili departments, as well as civil society organisations, in an effort to promote the language among young people. In addition, Kiswahili has increasingly been deployed in support of actualising cross-border trade relations among EAC countries.

The commission oversees a regional annual conference on Kiswahili, which is hosted by EAC members on a rotating basis, and contributes to a range of other meetings on this topic in Eastern Africa and elsewhere, including the US and Germany. It also organises and oversees celebrations for the "World Kiswahili Day" every 7 July.

Further to the work undertaken by the commission, a budget has now been allocated by the EAC to ensure that all its organs and institutions allocate resources and equipment to facilitate the use of Kiswahili in their activities.

Soudien: And what is the state of the Kiswahili departments in universities?

Jowi: Kiswahili departments in universities undertake training and research and award qualifications up to PhD level just like any other university department. In addition, there are active national associations that hold meetings and promote the use of Kiswahili by students, academic staff, writers and the media. So, there are many opportunities for academic engagement by students and professors of Kiswahili.

Soudien: The opposite is happening in South Africa. The number of students majoring in the country's indigenous languages has plummeted. For example, the number of students registered in isiXhosa, Zulu, Tswana and so on at the University of South Africa (UNISA) has fallen from 100,000 to about 13,000.

Jowi: That used to be the situation here too, but it is beginning to improve, especially with regard to Kiswahili. However, there are still many African languages which are in decline – languages which are not taught anywhere and which pupils may not even be allowed to speak at primary school. In this regard, the elevation of Kiswahili as a common language may potentially lead many people to consider the other ethnic languages redundant.

Soudien: Are people aware of that as an issue?

Jowi: I don't know whether people are aware of that; but the reality in Tanzania, for example, is that most people function in Kiswahili and have tended to lose their other home language. In part, this may be attributed to the efforts made by the country's founding father, Julius Nyerere, to foster unity across the country. Everybody was expected to speak Swahili so that the idea of one nation or people could be promoted. In this context, the practice of speaking one's home languages, which

was viewed as an indicator of one's ethnicity, came to be seen in a negative light. Against this background, the promotion of Kiswahili as a regional language may reinforce the view that the other languages are surplus to requirement, which could lead to them being undermined.

Soudien: So, there is no academic interest in researching these other languages?

Jowi: Not much. No books are published in these other languages anymore. And people struggle to write in their mother tongue. Meanwhile, even with Kiswahili, people are pleasantly surprised when a visiting president makes a speech in Kiswahili (a local language) rather than English, even though it should be the other way round: people in the region should expect their leaders to be speaking Kiswahili fluently and should rather be surprised when they speak English well.

Soudien: How many other languages are there in Tanzania?

Jowi: There would be over 100 other languages. But, among my generation, most parents wanted their kids to speak English, which was seen as a sign that they were knowledgeable. As a result, many couldn't speak their mother-tongue.

Soudien: In relation to digitisation and 4IR, could you talk about the tech innovations that are coming out of eastern Africa, including Kenya, and whether the creativity that has informed these innovations could also be introduced into places of teaching and learning?

Jowi: Students across eastern Africa have been innovative in the deployment of new technologies, including by starting small businesses. However, although such innovation may take place within the ecosystem of a university, it is not being promoted at the formal level within the university systems.

Soudien: So, there are formal and informal spheres for the deployment of technology, and informal sphere is developing faster than the formal one.

Jowi: Yes. For example, when I started with ANIE, I felt that its location in a university was advantageous since it would enable me to tap into the skills on offer at the institution, including among the students. However, universities in the region seem relatively unable to tap into and utilise their students' skills and capacity to innovate and provide solutions, as was found by a recent study conducted with colleagues from Europe. In this regard, I think the universities and the older generation at these institutions need to take radical action, and acknowledge and leverage the know-how and capacity of the younger generation who have learnt to use and manipulate digital devices, such as their mobile phones, from an early age.

Soudien: So, are the technological innovations generally being produced by people with university qualifications?

Jowi: It's a mix. Some of the innovators are university graduates but most do not have university qualifications, which reflects changing preferences for education among the younger generation. For example, young people are increasingly choosing to attend TVET colleges rather than universities so that they can exploit the relatively close relationship between these colleges and the job market; and so that they can pursue a practically- rather than theoretically-oriented approach to the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Soudien: But they have been trained at technical colleges, so may be considered to be products of higher education.

Jowi: Yes. But there also innovations that have been produced as a result of experience by learners working with their hands, trying to understand the principles of how different components function and should be put together. So, for example, some intuitive and innovative solutions have been forged during apprenticeships.

Soudien: Have you come across any innovative support systems for students, such as, for example, informal networks of individuals from the same home area helping each other to survive and flourish at university?

Jowi: Yes. There are a number of networks that help underprivileged students access education. People in certain communities and neighbourhoods mobilise resources to ensure that local children can access education – and some of these cases are publicised by the media which encourages popular support for the initiatives. So, for example, I personally have helped support children through secondary school after being approached by their families. In addition, a number of foundations have been established in Kenya with the aim of helping disadvantaged children access education. At the same time, however, many disadvantaged children continue to face inadequate access to education.

Luescher: Eastern Africa has always been a little more integrated than other regions on the continent, as indicated by the EAC's move to promote mutual recognition of professional qualifications across its member countries. So, can you talk a bit about what that initiative means in terms of governance across the region?

Jowi: Mutual recognition of professional qualifications has facilitated the mobility of professionals within the region. The initiative was established after the EAC decided to liberalise certain quite regulated professions. The first step in implementing this decision was to canvass interest in the initiative among the various national regulatory authorities for these professions, and to hold meetings with them to raise awareness of the benefits of a liberalised approach. Then the regulatory authorities came together to negotiate and agree benchmarks and nomenclature for the various levels within their professions and signed regional mutual recognition agreements accordingly. So far, agreements have been reached for engineers, architects, veterinarians, accountants, and, after some debate about which judicial bodies had the authority to sign, lawyers. Meanwhile, discussions continue in other professional fields.

Under these agreements, individuals who are on the professional roll in one EAC country are qualified to conduct business in any other state in the community. In addition, the initiative has promoted capacity building, allowing professional groups in one country to strengthen the capacity of their peers in another country. As part of such efforts, the EAC has established a number of cross-country internship programmes, which, for example, may enable young accountants in Kenya to find positions at an accounting firm in Burundi or any other state covered by the mutual recognition agreement.

Luescher: On the subject of governance, have you observed any positive trends in relation to the management of universities?

Jowi: There is more autonomy in the management of public universities. Previously, national leaders and governments had a lot of say in what goes on at universities, including on a daily basis.

But that has changed. For example, in Kenya and Tanzania, the extent of the governments' direct engagement with university activities and operations has reduced, even though the funding for universities in the region continues to be mainly provided by governments. Meanwhile, governance mechanisms and frameworks within universities have generally improved, even though they are not the best.

However, it should be noted that a number of universities in the region are currently in financial crisis, in large part as a result of poor governance. In Kenya, for example, most of the public universities are in the red, as a result of the legacy of privately sponsored university student programmes, under which higher education institutions overstretched themselves, opening unaffordable satellite campuses to cater to privately-funded fee-paying students. Now, these campuses need to be closed and there are calls for some of the universities to be amalgamated, so that a leaner, more efficient system may be established.

Luescher: You have talked about the prospects for major transformation of the higher education sector – for example, in relation to the rise of a new tech-savvy generation, the so-called digital natives. In relation to the possibility of transformation, do you envisage any ruptures between present and future modes of operation in the eastern African higher education space?

Jowi: Yes. The coming generation of Kenyan pupils who have been taught in primary and secondary schools according to a competency-based curriculum will be unlikely to tolerate being taught as the current generation of university students are being taught. So, there is a rupture coming. In response, the government has already invited faculty deans and department heads to meet those who are implementing the competency-based curriculum, so that universities can start preparing teachers for a new pedagogical approach.

Luescher: You also mentioned that TVET-based skills development has become increasingly attractive to students. Is that because, in the context of high rates of unemployment among

university graduates, those with artisanal skills are more likely to find work than their peers with professional skills?

Jowi: Those who have TVET skills are more likely to find work and will probably earn more than university graduates. A TVET graduate who works as a plumber is today likely to earn much more than a teacher. In addition, individuals with practical skills have greater flexibility in terms of when and where they work. For example, while a teacher may have to work in the same classroom all term, a plumber can work in the morning or the afternoon and may travel widely for work – all of which is more appealing to young people.

Luescher: But are there not still significant professional opportunities for graduates with teaching, medical, legal and engineering qualifications?

Jowi: Even for teachers, the job market for graduates is not that wide open anymore. In Kenya, for example, there is not enough capacity in the education system to absorb all the teachers being produced. So, newly qualified graduate teachers may have to wait five years for a posting, as those who graduated in previous years take preference for the jobs on offer.

Luescher: Your comments about African languages and, in particular, Kiswahili seemed to indicate not only that there may be a rupture coming, but also that there might be a rupture needed.

Jowi: There could be a rupture needed in the sense that the thinking about African languages may need to be revisited. At present, no research studies are being written in African languages, apart from a few in Kiswahili – which means that these languages are absent from the international academic discourse. In addition, African languages need to be preserved as an integral aspect of cultural identity on the continent.