

# Imagining African Universities in 2050: Conceptual Grounds and Emerging Images

## Concept paper

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The challenges faced by African universities are wide-ranging and include, *inter alia*, the need to: address past economic and social imbalances; expand access to meet the increasing demand; facilitate student epistemological access and success; promote socially and culturally more responsive curriculum and delivery strategies; and respond to the challenges posed by the information and technological revolution. Covid-19 has added an unprecedented layer of pressures with repercussions on the mission, purpose, goals, structure and *modus operandi* of universities: online teaching and learning; rethinking of pedagogy, assessment and curricula; emergency investment in digital infrastructure; a blockage in the flow of international mobility; and behavioural changes among students and staff, etc. These challenges are accompanied by continued inconsistencies in the nation-state behaviour regarding higher education. Overall, these challenges have to be addressed in a context of a deepening economic and social crisis, declining public expenditure and generalised poverty. Such is the scenario under which I set myself to imagine how universities in Africa should look like by 2050. I argue that imagining such future requires re-thinking the mission of the university in Africa within a new horizon of possibilities informed by greater epistemological, political and moral responsibility, and deeper understanding of the complex African experience.

### **Beyond alternatives: alternative thinking**

Many alternatives have been suggested for the future African universities (see for example AU and ADEA Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2018-2025). My own Vice-Chancellor is supporting a project on Creating the New African University. We have just launched a research project aimed at critically analysing the intellectual legacies of African scholars, intellectuals, leaders, and institutions, and the nature of their contribution to knowledge production with specific reference to influencing and/or shaping the higher education landscape, discourse, policy, and practice in Africa. Underpinning these efforts is the commonly shared assumption that complex problems need a deeper and different way of thinking: 'We need to start thinking differently so that we can understand deeply'. I want to suggest that, in line with this sentiment and against the complexity of the trauma caused by the colonialism and apartheid for both the perpetrators and the victims, what is needed is not just **alternatives** but **alternative thinking** about the purpose and the nature of the university to be able to tackle the twin challenge of development and social justice as prerequisites for sustainable development.

Alternative thinking requires confronting our philosophical foundations, theoretical constructs, methodological bases within the university; revisiting and creating more appropriate concepts; and developing assumptions rooted in our histories and experiences. It requires scrutinising the knowledges that we work with and work through them, including on the futures discourse. This means that today **epistemological decolonisation** grounded in social justice is no longer a slogan but a consequence of the realisation that the university exists for a greater purpose. Epistemological decolonisation is a fundamental point of departure for emancipatory projects in the continent. It also means that the colonial and apartheid heritage of the university in Africa needs to be urgently interrupted.

### **Commitment to a greater purpose in context**

The concept of 'ivory tower' is no longer defensible; universities exist to serve a greater purpose in society. However, a commitment to *a greater purpose should be understood in context*; it is only

realisable in context. In Africa, the context is that of vulnerability (to diseases, pandemics, hunger and starvation, poverty, war and crime, etc.); and that of crisis in academia (apathy, despair, corruption and disruptions) in the midst of the broader political, economic and social crisis ravaging the continent, and the climate change and environmental stress. It is now unquestionable whether universities should play a critical role in addressing these challenges. The question is about the nature of this role. Unfortunately, we have not always been clear in defining the position, the place and space of the university in Africa and globally. In this regard, the notions of university 'excellence' or 'greatness' and the necessary forms of measurement have become highly problematic. For example, as suggested by Rensburg (2015: 308) "Universities, including universities which specialise in research, can no longer be ranked primarily by their research, but also by how they and their research and other activities respond to these grand challenges, in terms of cooperation, integration, inclusion, caring and civic-mindedness" (Rensburg 2015: 308). A development logic driven by competitiveness and ranking threatens to leave the poor and the less developed further and further behind" (Rensburg 2015: 309). Beyond 'excellence', serving a greater purpose requires greater attention to humanism (as shown under COVID-19), academic integrity and social responsibility.

### **Academic integrity**

Missing from current measurements of university excellence or greatness is a framework of academic integrity with a strong ethical, moral and political basis to reconcile competitiveness pressures with social responsiveness. I do not use the notion of academic integrity only with reference to proliferation of 'misconduct' and 'corruption' (e.g., abuses by faculty and students such as credential fraud, application fraud, fabrication and falsification of results, plagiarism and unethical teaching or research practices, etc.) which usually are addressed via codes of conduct, rules and regulations. Neither am I concerned here only with ethics of behaviour associated with professional practice or connected with quality and performance. I am interested here in the academic integrity criteria highly sensitive to the context in which universities operate in Africa geared at measuring the social impact of university outputs as part of the barometer of individual and institutional ethical standards.

### **Academic responsibility and humanist ethos**

Brink (2020) notes that so far we have been too much focused on supply questions (what are we good at?) to the detriment of demand questions (what are we good for?), i.e. questions about our role as universities in society. He shows how the pandemic has forced us to reframe our approach to these questions and at least in practice re-think the mission of the university through interventions that reconnect the university to society (e.g., efforts to redesign the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to reach students beyond the campus space, research on vaccines, social inequality and epistemic access of disadvantaged students, etc.). He argues that, while academic excellence and academic freedom are essential to the functioning of the university, they are insufficient, the radically changing world calls for greater social and moral responsibility; to academic freedom and epistemic freedom, there should be academic responsibility. I add to his claim the need for a more humanistic approach in face of generalised social vulnerability. I thus fully endorse, the claim that as a university in Africa we can no longer to justify our reputation, legitimacy, credibility and moral authority only on the grounds of 'what we are good at', without a demonstration of 'what we are good for' the benefit of society. As he correctly emphasises: "Responsiveness to the needs and demands of society is, therefore, both a moral imperative and a strategy with much to commend." (Brink 2021).

### **The intersecting settings of the African university: epistemic implications**

Futures can only be imagined in the intersecting contexts in which, or with reference to which, the university in Africa executes its functions and performs its tasks. These include the local context, its interface with past history (the legacies), and its interface with the global world. Imagining the future requires an understanding of the dynamics at play in these contexts.

- *The interface with the past.* Emphasising the role of memory, Assie-Lumumba (2018: 4) argues that “historical consciousness is critically important in analysing the present and in trying to find solutions for our contemporary challenges”. She quotes Clarke (1996) as stating that: “History tells the people where they have been, what they have been, where they are, and what they are. Most important, history tells the people where they still must go and what they still must be.” (quoted by Assie-Lumumba, 2018:4). In this perspective, when thinking about the future of the university in Africa, we can no longer underestimate the pervasive influences of colonial legacies and how they remain entrenched in the structure and operations of the university. Coloniality, which should be interrupted, remains entrenched in the present-day university and even in some of our own alternative discursive imagination. Thus, history offers unlimited opportunity for learning, unlearning or re-learning deeply in framing our imaginations about their future.
- *Engaging with the global world.* There are two main choices to the encounter with the global world, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. The first is the ‘marketplace approach’, whereby the university is widely open to the competitive flow of ideas, technology, values, symbols, and all cultural imagery regulated by the markets. This approach does not account for the diversity of the world and experiences, and the plurality of our understandings. The second reflects what West (1995:167) has referred to as the ‘go-it-alone’ attitude, strongly embedded in narrow Afrocentric views, which call for an arrogant insularity. It is self-defeating and can only lead to self-ghettoisation. The reality is that African universities today exist in the context of globalisation and operate at the interface of local and global spaces. Mutual engagement between these local and the global remains a necessity. In this sense, the future African university is a university that takes cognisance of its African insertion in the globalising world without losing its soul. This means that an epistemological break is needed in the ways the two worlds articulate with each other particularly in the knowledge domain.

Briefly, with the notion of intersecting contexts, I argue for a university, which though international in character, remains grounded in its historical roots, cognisant of its ‘original sin’ as a colonial product strives to interrupt the legacy of coloniality, is open to introspection and critically engages with the global world. I have referred to this concept elsewhere as the ‘universal African university’ (UAU) (Cross 2020). This is a heuristic to refer to a university that in its mission, does not seek to affirm African singularities as universality, or crush singularities for the sake of global uniformity; nor does it exacerbate singularity to the point of isolationism (self-ghettoisation). It is a university that affirms singularity through the mediation of the universal and affirms the universal through the mediation of singularities. Above all, it is a university, which in its vision, mission and goals as well as its insertion in society, is geared by the values of humanism, social justice, academic integrity and social responsibility, as articulated in this concept paper. As such, it is by necessity within the domain of emancipatory imaginations.

## References

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