

Contestation in the 21st Century African University: Local and Global Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

In this conceptual article we posit that, if the African university is to locate itself in the 21st century, the precedence of local needs over global demands ought to be central to its agenda. The university space in Africa is a contested arena in which participants are claiming their dominant space in terms of knowledge production, control and responding to local needs. Standing on the one side is the university's commitment to promote transformation by producing knowledge relevant and being responsive to local needs, with the fulfilment of the global demand for knowledge for the global market on the other. This creates an anomaly in the competing demands in university practices that lead to the polarisation of the role of the university. In this article we submit to Guy's (2009, p. 1) assertion that the global and the local are best understood as the two opposite sides of the same distinction, which assists in describing various elements of social movements, inequalities, crises and identities.

Keywords: university, transformation, role, knowledge, local, global

1. Introduction

There seems to be an absence of advancement of the initial commitment to the transformation of the education system and a lack of a corresponding response to local needs and aspirations, despite various efforts by African states to realise independence and educate their people for self-reliance. This is premised on the supposition that the early universities on the African continent recognised that higher education (HE) ought to focus on African issues. Various studies defend the standpoint that university practices should place local needs and interests at their centre (Assié-Lumumba, 2006; Makgoba, 1999; Waghid, 2012). For instance, Makgoba (1999, pp. 7-9) offers a critical reflection on African states, saying that the ideals of the university should comprehend their intentions and aspirations and acknowledge how early African scholars such as Kwame Nkrumah and Yesufu recognised how (higher) education is a tool for the empowerment and development of their nations. For such scholars, education was the first step in the ladder to individual sovereignty – to be a master of one's own destiny. For that reason, education, specifically in the university, ought to be "for all, by all and for life" (Makgoba, 1999, p. 7). Makgoba also draws from different university systems in the world, including the British, American, Japanese and Chinese, to show how each system is unique and relevant to the individual nation's contextual needs. For him, while each university system maintains the universal concept of university, each system is adapted to the values and needs of its respective environment and society. This explains why the *African university* is central in this article.

There are different perspectives on what the ideals and roles of a university ought to be. For example, from the Humboldtian ideals delineated by Smeyers (2011, p. 5), three facets underpin the role of universities, namely teaching and research, development and nation building, and raising individuals' capacities beyond economics and politics. Other institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), expect universities to become global players and to produce knowledge as a competitive commodity for the market economy. On the other hand, Africanist scholars have called for the university's commitment to search for the transformation of knowledge to become relevant and responsive to local interests (Makgoba, 1999; Zeleza, 2004). Considering the above, we contend that, if aligned to its initial goals, the contemporary *African university* possesses the potential to transform its practices despite overwhelming global demands. This supposition makes imperative the question about who should benefit from the current knowledge

produced in the 21st-century *African university*.

Frank and Meyer (2007, p. 287) assert that the public mission of the modern university is to help solve social problems by improving business organisations and capital investments, protecting the natural environment, preserving human rights and cultural diversity, resolving crises of governance, and promoting democracy. Given the background, of African university education being relevant to local needs, we are provoked to question:

What are the underlying roles associated with the university in Africa and the dominant ideas driving its practices?

Is there sufficient recognition of and response to local needs and aspirations as envisaged by the early African independent states?

What is the future of an *African university* in the 21st century?

In response to the above questions, this article engages with the contesting views by unpacking the underlying contextual commitment and aspirations underpinning the practices of the African university against the universal role of a university as articulated by different theorists. This implies that the role of a university cannot be interrogated without reference to the philosophy entrenched in its practices.

Emanating from the foregoing, this paper debates the place of the *African university* in epitomising its commitment to the transformative agenda of producing knowledge relevant to local needs in an era when globalisation has gained currency. The analysis begins with conceptualising the notions of local and global before defining an *African university*. This will be followed by an exploration of the role of the university in Africa. Thirdly, we problematise the polarisation created by the competing views and contend that global demands have pervaded the *African university*. We conclude by arguing that, if an authentic transformation is to be engendered, knowledge production ought to be relevant to local needs and at the epicentre of the university agenda before global demands.

2. The Local and the Global

Conceptualising the notions of local and global, we draw on Guy's (2009) interpretation to enhance our understanding and justify our take on a localised *African university*. There are two contentions in the meaning: local and global are not spatial structures, as levels, spaces and distance, but compete against each other as different representations of space to determine within society the reality that society is. The global and the local are best understood as two opposite distinctions applied in communication as a code to generate information about a society or world. This interpretation of the local and global can assist in describing various elements within the context in relation to social movements, inequalities, crises and identities (Guy, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, we adopt the assertion that the immediate environment is the local space in which a university finds itself, that is, the nation and then the continent, in this case Africa, and the needs and crisis found within this context should be at the centre of its practices. This demands a symbiotic relationship between local and global practices, whereby both levels take into account each other's needs and challenges.

Guy offers an analogy of small local and big global and posits that, "as sizes or ranges, global and local have no pre-determined special connection on the conceptual plane. The relation between the two depends on the relation between the concrete actors or settings or conjunctures characterized by them" (2009, p. 2). Likewise, we assert that the local and global are understood as specific sizes and/or ranges. In this context, local as small implies the society in which the university is situated in terms of immediateness of an environment, while global as big entails the larger scale, rather than significance or high value. This is because the local is circumscribed within the big, hence a need for the appreciation of the distinctive significance and role that each plays. The above interpretation evokes the following questions:

- Why does one call a space, in this case a university, local or global?
- What is going on when a university is called local or global?
- What makes such a space/university local or global?

In addressing the above questions, we agree with Guy that there have to be sufficient reasons for referring to a space as local or global, in this case the university in terms of social movements, inequalities, crises and identities. We contend that issues of local interest cannot be divorced from the global, since the local is situated within the global (Guy, 2009, p. 2). Thus, a university and its practices situated within different circles of the global should connect to urgent local crises and address such needs before attending to global interests. The point we are making is that, when talking about a university in Africa serving issues facing the immediate environment, it has to begin from the centre that is the nation in which the institution is situated, then move to the continent, and then the globe. This implies the relevance of the global, because the local is located within the global and vice versa. We contend that one cannot divorce local practices from the global. However, our contention is that local needs ought to be at the core of the practices of the *African university* before global demands. The following section interrogates the role of the university.

3. The Role of the University

Before we explore the role of the university, it is essential to offer a brief depiction of the African continent and the challenges confronting society on the continent. The continent of Africa, and its countries, are confronted by numerous challenges and crises that requires urgent and concerted social and economic efforts in relation to poverty, diseases (like HIV and Aids, Ebola), inequality, domestic violence, the abuse of girls and women, genital mutilation and passion-killing/murder; and by political upheavals, namely ethnic conflicts and war, resistance to democratic principles and so forth (Waghid, 2002). Concerning the above challenges, Yizengaw (2008, p. 1) posits that HE is critical to the economic success and long-term development of Africa, a continent facing several challenges to growth and development. HE, particularly the university, provides economic and social benefits, both to the individual and the public, produces qualified human capital, adapts and generates knowledge, promotes international cooperation and improves competitiveness in the global knowledge-based economy. Yizengaw (2008, p. 4) stresses that the HE sector in Africa faces challenges related to a critical shortage of quality faculty; limited capacity of governance, leadership and management; inadequate financial support and problems of diversify funding; inadequate facilities and infrastructure; problems of quality and relevance of teaching and research; limited capacity of research, knowledge generation and adaptation capabilities; and problems in meeting increasing demand for equitable access. We argue that there are numerous challenges and trends that are prevalent in Africa that cannot be separated from the production of knowledge in universities and in their immediate society.

Undoubtedly, these challenges and trends tend to create complexities in the society and also to affect university practices. Since the university plays an integral part in society and occupies a central space in knowledge production and dissemination, it is imperative for its practices to prioritise and interrogate means by which these challenges can be addressed. Therefore, we argue that university practices should prioritise the abovementioned critical issues confronting the institution's immediate environment for it to qualify as an *African university*. The practices of the university can be considered to operate effectively only if they are relevant and responsive to local needs and aspirations. *African university* education therefore requires collective and concerted efforts to advance and protect credible knowledge production and development. Equally, Makgoba (1999, pp. 8-9) argues that, since the university in Africa, like elsewhere in the world, serves as a champion of society, it should deal with the production, preservation and dissemination of knowledge in relation to contextual needs. The quality of knowledge requires an element of excellence and, in order to excel, each university has to have a unique identity within its context. In this sense, knowledge production needs to be central to serving the immediate society before serving external desires.

Taking Makgoba's standpoint into account, the adaption and integration of knowledge to the needs of society are fundamental to each university's practices. On the role of universities in the new South Africa, Reddy offers the interpretation that "... the transformation of universities" encapsulated a fundamental and deep-rooted restructuring process (Cited in Higgs, 2010, p. 368) that required a substantial and meaningful degree of popular participation in key initiatives. It meant empowering the disempowered and the reorganisation of power relations, and focused on common interest rather than special interest. When applied to the role of universities in society, Fehnel (cited in Higgs, 2010, p. 368) claimed that it alluded to the bringing about of fundamental changes in the system of HE in South Africa in order to adapt to the transformative national and regional realities of the 21st century. In pursuance of the above, we contend that African university practices, particularly the production of knowledge, should take the contextual needs and aspirations of people into consideration.

3.1 Modes of knowledge production

Before interrogating the contemporary university in Africa, we explore Gibbons et al. (1994, pp. 2-3) interpretation that knowledge production can be understood in two modes, Mode 1 and Mode 2. Mode 1 entails a form of knowledge production that comprises a complex of ideas, methods, values, norms – that has grown up to control the diffusion of the Newtonian model to more and more fields of enquiry and ensure its compliance with what is considered found scientific practice (Gibbons, 1994, p. 2). This model is viewed as identical to what is meant by science. Mode 1 summarises, in a single phrase, the cognitive and social norms that must be followed in the production, legitimation and diffusion of knowledge of this kind. In the sense that these are cognitive and social norms that establish what shall count as significant problems, who shall be allowed to practise science and what constitutes good science? This mode of practice adheres to set rules and scientific definition, and failure to conform to the rules will mean that knowledge products will not be legitimised. Nonetheless, while Mode 1 is essential in its capacity, we agree that, in itself, it is insufficient to serve the needs and interests of the immediate society (Waghid, 2002, p. 457). For that reason, Gibbons et al. (1994, pp. vii-viii)

propose an emergent form of knowledge production, called Mode 2, as a second dimension to the production of knowledge. This form of knowledge production is a socially distributed framework for research and interacts closely with numerous actors in universities, which are socially accountable. So, knowledge produced in the university in Africa should be one applicable and relevant to the contextual needs and interests of the local people. Mode 2 utilises a wider range of criteria in evaluating the quality of this knowledge. This implies that the knowledge-production process is becoming more reflexive, and influences what counts as knowledge and how to apply it within a context. The Mode 2 attributes explain that knowledge is derived from different motives, which HE, especially universities, is expected to uphold within a society (Nowotny et al., 2003, pp. 182-183). We therefore contend that the two modes are not opposite to each other, but rather complementary. This understanding enables us to question the production of knowledge, and provokes crucial questions, such as: What kind of knowledge is produced in universities in Africa? Is the knowledge sufficiently relevant to contextual needs and interests for that university to qualify as an African university? How is this knowledge distributed and valued? And for whose benefit? Taking into account the precarious challenges confronting African society, we adopt Mode 2 to complement Mode 1, as Waghid (2002, p. 459) urges us to do. This is because Mode 2 speaks to significant elements, which call for the production of knowledge that is relevant and responsive to the contextual needs of the immediate society and the continent at large.

Omari (1991, cited in Cross, 1999, p. 4) affirms that, in the context of an *African university*, "research is the essence of scholarship and a necessary condition for the existence of the university, since without excellence in scholarship there can be no excellence in teaching, training, social reflection, and service". In our view, if research and teaching help inform scholarship to the excellence of all other university practices, then *African universities* are presumed to espouse the fundamental needs and aspirations of the contexts in which they are located. Seeing that the university system of each nation ought to uphold particular ideals to the benefit of local needs and aspirations, it is indispensable to engage with the underlying commitments of the contemporary *African university*.

4. The Contemporary University: Competing Demands

The university is expected to play a central role in the national project of social progress. Thus, Assié-Lumumba (2006, p. 9) posits that "HE (university) is not the sole space but it is, without doubt, central to the acquisition and production of knowledge that shapes the contemporary world". Central to this article is whether the university in Africa has the potential to survive and retain its relevance and responsiveness to local needs in the era of globalisation.

4.1 *Recounting the Transformative Agenda*

The fundamental wave of creating African universities took place during the 1960s through the 1970s, which was declared by the United Nations as the "Development Decade" and regarded as a liberal and transformative period for post-colonial society in Africa (Khelifaoui, 2009, p. 23). Most independent African countries needed concerted efforts to initiate substantial reforms. The theory of human capital was prominent in industrialised nation-states such as the United States of America (USA), where education was expected to be a powerful instrument for redressing the structural inequalities embedded in society (Assié-Lumumba, 2006, p. 9). Consequently, human capital theory became dominant in developing regions such as Africa. In spite of the continent's struggle for political liberation, this theory was infused into the nationalist discourse and liberation agenda. The theory assumes the creation of a linear and positive relationship between education and development, both at the individual and societal level, i.e. the higher the people's level of HE, the higher their productivity. For that reason, African nationalist leaders and scholars, including Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor and Julius Nyerere, thought it imperative to transform education. Accordingly, Sawyerr (2005, p. 2) articulates the African idea of transformation as follows:

Widespread university is essentially a postcolonial phenomenon ... and only 18 out of 48 countries of sub-Saharan Africa had universities or colleges before 1960. With the approach of political independence or immediately thereafter, many African countries regarded the establishment of local universities as a major part of the postcolonial national development projects. The new universities were to help the new nations build up their capacity to manage and develop their resources, alleviate the poverty of the majority of their people, We are particularly fascinated by the AAU's call for a transformative agenda towards the production of locally motivated knowledge that is relevant to local needs and aspirations. The foregoing commitment and roles have placed the university as a conduit of transformation to educate peoplepower – specifically producing knowledge relevant and responsive to the needs of the African masses.

The postcolonial nationalist struggle for independence gave rise to the primary idea of having an equal right to access HE, with the aim of producing skilled people power to run a modern government and economy, as well as for

other areas of governance. The underlying assumption was that HE ought to be opened to all people in Africa, including the disadvantaged, people with disabilities, the poor, and girls and women. However, Yesufu argues that Africa adopted pro-Western liberal ideologies and capitalist systems, which conceived of HE as an agent of development, imbedded in the notion of *Development University* (cited in Assié-Lumumba, 2004, p. 1). In this sense, the mission of the university is to formulate relevant programmes and to equip human resources with knowledge for the actualisation of the government's project of national development. In the case of South Africa, one of the central goals of HE institutions is "to provide the full spectrum of advanced educational opportunities for an expanding range of the population irrespective of race, gender, age, creed or class or forms of discrimination" (Department of Education, 1997, pp. 1, 27). This depiction ties to our argument that the university in Africa ought to prioritise its efforts to address pressing concerns. In addition, Sawyerr (2005, p. 2) said that:

The new universities were to help new Africa nations build up their capacity to develop and manage their resources, alleviate the poverty of the majority of their people, and close the gap between them and the developed world.

Nonetheless, we argue that African Higher Education (AHE), characterised by a systemic dependency and neo-colonial framework, does not necessarily take into account Africans' perspectives and interests. We contend that the historical legacy thwarts the continent's envisioned commitment to universities serving local interests and needs. Despite the aforesaid legacy, there are other contemporary external demands that encumber the university in Africa to attain its initial goals. Thus, in the search for initiatives to transform the university in Africa, the neoliberal project of globalisation sets in, coupled with its call for knowledge production for the global economic market.

4.2 Global Demands of Knowledge Production

Novelli and Ferus-Comelo (2010, p. 8) signify neoliberal theory and its globalisation project as a hegemonic approach that perceives societies as functioning best when the market is left alone to determine distribution, production and consumption patterns. To execute this ideology, structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) were implemented, either voluntarily by national governments or through disciplinary mechanisms in low-income countries by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This initiative was set as a condition for debt-ridden nations to gain access to international loans and grants. It is under these conditions that the World Bank drew up HE policies to implement the SAPs of neoliberalism. The dominant theme underscoring neoliberal ideology is the call for economic globalisation in the university's educational practices in Africa, which hamper local ideals and aspirations. The idea was imposed in HE policies across Africa by the World Bank's SAPs in the 1980s (Ajayi, Lameck, Goma, & Ampah, 1996). Globalisation is a project of neoliberalism "articulated primarily through SAPs ... that ... has accelerated the corporation of unitary management, commercialization of learning and commoditization of knowledge" (Zezeza, 2004, p. 42). As a result, the nature, governance and identity of scholarly discourse and pedagogical practices at universities in Africa have also changed. The question is what can one expect of the interaction between HE systems and practices on the African continent and globalisation and neoliberalism? Zezeza (2004, pp. 51-52) regards globalisation as the biggest challenge facing HE in Africa, showing how the initial mission of educating Africa's citizens to become self-reliant is being compromised. Similarly, Naidoo (2003, p. 249) states that African governments have tended to use "globalisation" as a rationale for HE reform by repositioning it as a global commodity". Paradoxically, globalisation has turned HE institutions into an economic investment rather than a common good that would afford everyone – especially marginalised groups – access to HE and to be fully included in these institutions. Our argument is that SAPs created a bottleneck for African states to achieve the transformative goals of producing knowledge relevant to the local masses and needs.

5. Contradictory Demands in the University: Challenges

Students, institutions, business and philanthropy need to join hands if public funding is to play a more meaningful and consistent role in national development. For instance, the World Bank (1994, p. 10) called for the optimal use of human and physical capital to encourage the development of new technologies for communication and the integration of developing countries into the global intellectual community. However, the World Bank (1994, p. 11) stated that the financing of HE did not need to be limited to the public purse, since this would lead to high dependency on government resources. While the call for private financing is necessary to alleviate the expenses of the government, this move prevented AHE from devoting resources to urgent needs, particularly creating a space for disadvantaged groups.

Contemporary Africa has about 800 universities and more than 1 500 tertiary institutions, largely because of the

radical increase in the proportion of private universities. This high concentration of private institutions and their concomitant demand for and backing of marketable courses is out-competing public universities regarding their high-earning programmes (Moja, 2007). This leaves doubt whether African countries will attain their goal of addressing local needs and achieving the socioeconomic agenda. We find World Bank policy demanding that HE institutions in Africa implement global economic policies as a condition for receiving funding at the expense of local needs. We agree with the claims by Amaral, Meek and Larsen (2003, p. 14) that the World Bank enforces a "one model fits all" system, even in impossible environments such as Africa.

A 2005 survey of HE by various economists (Mohamedbhai, 2008, p. 12) showed that the university as a traditional institution of higher learning was undergoing major changes, affecting them to their very core. There were four main reasons for this. *Firstly*, the democratisation of education poses a threat to the traditional position of universities as institutions of HE for the elite. *Secondly*, the rise of the knowledge economy has put pressure on traditional learning methods and the courses offered at universities. *Thirdly*, the phenomenon of globalisation is turning HE into an export industry; and lastly, competition comes into play, as traditional institutions have to compete for students, funds and research grants. HE knowledge production is deeply embedded in the idea of becoming competitive in the world market, and ignores local crises, particularly economic and social inequality. We argue that the production of knowledge in public AHE, as elsewhere in the world, is faced with competing perspectives of what, for whom, and in whose interests' knowledge is produced, whether they are responding mainly to local aspirations or the needs of the 21st century. Such a dilemma requires a paradigm shift towards genuine transformation.

6. Towards a Relevant 21st-century African University

We have argued that globalisation causes universities to adopt a neoliberal discipline in the way they conduct their affairs, their teaching and learning, as well as their governance and management. This simply means that universities in Africa perceive students as consumers of commoditised knowledge and competitors in the global market, rather than as transformers of past imbalances and injustices on the continent. Here, we reiterate Makgoba's (1999, p. 7) question about why the contemporary university in Africa should accept an education (HE system) that is largely irrelevant to local needs, contexts and cultural settings. Makgoba's query is relevant to the current university in Africa and we contend that the onus is on African leaders of both states and universities to prepare themselves to navigate through these complexities. This simply means that the management and leadership of African universities should take a new look at the way in which they adopt the external policies that Amaral et al. (2003, p. 14) call the "one model fits all" approach, so as to redefine them and make them relevant to the context. In our view, an African university needs to prioritise local needs and challenges before global demands to retain its position.

Without the university prioritising local needs, globalisation can be regarded as another form of enslavement and indoctrination, considering its influence on state discourses and governance systems, as well as the way it affects the university's arrangements and practices on the African continent (Khelfaoui, 2009). Likewise, Divala (2008, p. 175) maintains that universities in Africa have to adopt, negotiate and struggle with neoliberal forces, and concomitantly to achieve transformation towards "localised" relevance and "globalised" recognition and competence. This has affected most of the universities' operations, from the kind of knowledge pursued and the recruitment of teaching staff, to student enrolment and graduation rates. Evidently, African countries, through their ministries of education, have taken on the task to pursue a number of strategic objectives, including improved access, participation and equity, with an emphasis on science and technology education and training and decentralised management and efficiency gains. We concede that the acquisition of knowledge to navigate through the complexities of this world is a necessity for everyone, and that there has been and still is inequality in universities in Africa, which ties in with the way such institutions are run – by adopting international policies. This is because institutions of higher learning end up intensifying their policies in relation to the need for globalisation and ignore their context and local crises. A paradigm shift is required, but what are the possibilities for a shift?

Primarily, the university in Africa ought to be reconceptualised and its dominant roles need to be identified (Shanyanana, 2014). Knowledge production, teaching and research need to be relevant to local challenges and needs. Waghid's (2012, p. 72) postulates that the function of postcolonial universities in Africa is *firstly* to produce advanced, high-quality scientific knowledge and technology, to train highly skilled professionals and researchers as a necessary workforce, and to cultivate a democratic citizenry through social engagement. *Secondly*, if universities do not commit themselves to the education of enlightened, informed and critical citizens they can be said to be elitist, since this would not engender in students a capacity for judgment and for informed participation in democratic life. While public universities are called upon to pay attention to producing knowledge for the market, we defend the view that instilling in

people, specifically marginalised groups, the capacity to engage critically and demand their rightful spaces in a democratic society is equally crucial. We argue that it is through a reconceptualised university education that we may cultivate critical thinkers who can reason and take into account their social responsibility, before producing knowledge for the global market economy.

Furthermore, Aarts and Greijn (2010, pp. 11-13) point out that *African university* students must be able to contextualise knowledge and apply it to the issue or problem that needs to be solved. This is because globalisation is risk learning, and knowledge development may become increasingly disconnected from the society in which the university is situated. There is no question that Africa needs knowledge workers and policy makers who have learned how to tap into global knowledge networks. But it is equally important that they are able to play an active role in using and adapting the knowledge they acquire for local development. We echo Waghid's (2012, p. 72) position that, for African universities to survive the 21st century, they need to develop in students a questioning, critical and democratic attitude so that they can contribute to knowledge production for local needs before global competition. Yet, the question that begs further answers is what should the 21st-century African universities do to shift from their current status of being placed in the local space but playing the role of global sites producing irrelevant knowledge? Our position is that critical engagement and research are required urgently to move the *African university* from this contested position to its ideal role in the 21st century.

7. Conclusion

We have argued that the *African university* becomes a contested space, creating a dichotomy of competing demands, from the local to the global. Our position is that, although the earlier African states recognised the role of the university in its context, the introduction of globalisation, especially its market-driven model, has polarised university practices. We have argued that, in order for the *African university* to survive the 21st century, its roles need to be reconceptualised, specifically its commitment to producing knowledge and research responsive to local challenges and needs. The prioritisation of local demands over the global should be at the centre of university practices in Africa. This move has the potential to enable the university to make meaningful contributions to the global community if it is to bear the authentic name, *African university*.

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