

Reimagining: new humans, new society, new higher education

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Mamphela Ramphela 08 March 2023

Nothing short of a human revolution would be an appropriate response to the depths of the multiple crises humanity faces today.

This is the audacious theme of the 13th Reinventing Higher Education Conference co-hosted on 6 March by two of my favourite universities: IE University in Madrid that I visited last year and met with dynamic students and staff who gave me hope that the future will be different and UCT (the University of Cape Town, South Africa), where I left a piece of my heart after 16 years of learning, growing, and learning to lead an institution in a society still wrestling with how to reimagine and rebuild itself.

I would like us to take a leaf from ancient wisdom: when in deep trouble, go back to the beginning. Humanity is being called to go back to ask the fundamental questions of what it means to be human. How do we relearn how to be true to the essence of our humanity? What is the role and place of education in its original meaning – “leading out or bringing forth that which lives within individual human beings, and nourishing the unique and unfathomable possibilities that each individual introduces in the world”?

Africa as the cradle of humanity and of the first human civilisation, understood that human beings are relational beings. *Ubuntu*, *Omenala* and similar expressions in African languages capture the essence of being human. We are inextricably interconnected and interdependent within the cycle of life.



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Our ancestors also understood the critical importance of nourishing the unique unfathomable possibilities of each person in mind, body and spirit to ensure that each can contribute appropriately to the common good.

Education as framed above was understood to be a holistic teaching and learning process integrated into every aspect of life, and channelled across generations to bring out the best in each person. Thought leaders, who were also spiritual leaders, guided societies to live out their full potentialities and manifest the core values of *Ubuntu* in all they do.

The reinvention of higher education you seek is nothing short of a *human revolution* that Aurelio Peccei, the founder of the Club of Rome, and Daisaku Ikeda, the president of Soka Gakkai International (Buddhist Institute), spoke of in their 1984 book, *Before it is Too Late*: “When the human revolution is achieved in the inner and outer beings of more and more people, human relations and relations between (hu)man and Nature will be harmonious. This will provide a reliable basis for the solution of the grave problems – environmental pollution, war, exhaustion of natural resources, and so on – facing humankind now.”

Our higher education systems today reflect the fragmentation in our lives as humans that masquerades as specialisation. Our reliance on technology to substitute for our failures to confront the chasm between what we know needs to be done, and our actions or inactions that reflect business as usual approaches.

Higher education is in many ways disconnected from the everyday lives of the majority of people in our world. Higher education is significantly captured by elites.

Elites deploy their enormous financial resources to fund technological innovations that are valuable to enabling us to meet human needs.

Sadly, the benefits of many innovations tend to be biased towards the promotion of the enrichment of a few at the expense of many. Inconvenient truths about ecological damage that threaten the very existence of Mother Earth continue to be ignored or marginalised in the pursuit of prosperity for the least number of people.

So how do we go about reinventing higher education systems that lead forth that which lives within each human being, and unleash the unfathomable possibilities each can introduce into the world? The good news is that ‘new humans’, ‘new societies’ and ‘new higher education’ systems are already emerging among us – we need only open our eyes and minds wider to enable this emergence to come into our consciousness.



The Club of Rome and UNESCO are partnering with a growing number of universities and research institutions in several initiatives aimed at the reframing of research and higher education for a better future.

Both the BRIDGES Sustainability Science Coalition and the International Year of Basic Sciences for Sustainable Development (IYBSSD) are creating spaces for the emergence of new institutions that are better suited to the complex systems change required of us today.

Universities, as they are today, are legacies of an era of monastic, hierarchical and siloed teaching and learning approaches.

The focus of the BRIDGES Coalition is to bridge the chasms between disciplines, the arts, humanities and sciences, teaching and learning, knowledge and practice. At the same time, IYBSSD is promoting in the multilateral arena the value of mobilising all threads of knowledge, including indigenous science, to face the societal challenges of today.

The good news is that your Reinventing Higher Education (RHE) Conference, initiated by IE University, is also supported by UNESCO. The opportunities for collaboration between these initiatives where the Club of Rome plays a key role and the RHE network institutions abound.

I would like to suggest that we consider the following approaches in exploring the way forward:

- *Convene conversations* within and between institutions focused on asking uncomfortable questions about our shared vision of the world we would like to live in? These conversations would spark the inner work essential to awakening our awareness of the core essence of being human. Self-liberation from traditional thinking is essential to evolving into the best versions of each of us.
- *Interrogate our understanding of what learning is?* If learning is understood as a process of approaching both knowledge and life, then it would encompass the acquisition and practice of new methodologies, new skills, new attitudes and new values necessary to live in a world of change.
- *Redesign higher education teaching and learning environments and spaces* to promote interactive learning, research and teaching. Most current lecture halls are designed for a world of top-down teaching, not suitable for the needs of mutual learning for a changing world. Redesigning teaching and learning spaces would promote participatory learning that would enlarge the bounds of possibilities to enrich our world.



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Aftab Dean

A new university ranking system aims to serve as a catalyst for positive transformation in higher education, ensuring that universities create an environment grounded in integrity and sustainability that inspires and supports students and staff in the development of novel solutions to global challenges.

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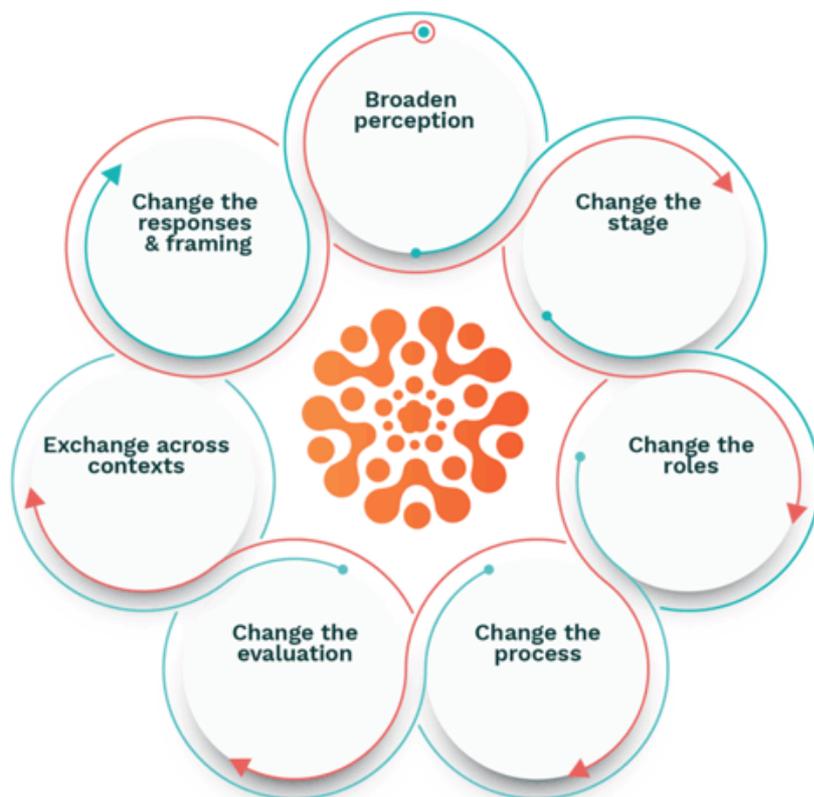
- *Redesign higher education institutions into 'regenerative institutions' that thrive on anticipating change and adapting to it, and shaping futures that promote the common good. Higher education institutions would then become more worthy alma maters – nourishing mothers whose graduates become the change-makers towards the human revolution we seek.*

- *Open curricular approaches for a changing world – Mind, heart and hands approaches to learning that enable graduates to close the gap between 'knowing' and 'doing' in all aspects of their lives as individuals, family members, community members and citizens of their countries and of the planet. We need to stop teaching courses such as classical neoliberal economics, and finance that have become drivers of extractive economics. Our history must also include stolen legacies (*Stolen Legacy**) that continue to marginalise Africa's contributions to philosophy, science, technology and much more.*

At the Club of Rome we are exploring the above approaches within the framework of ancient wisdom that speaks to life as the fifth element, together with wind/air, water, earth and fire.

The fifth element process

In Africa, conversations take place in circles so we can engage eyeball to eyeball, listening, sensing and developing deep understandings.



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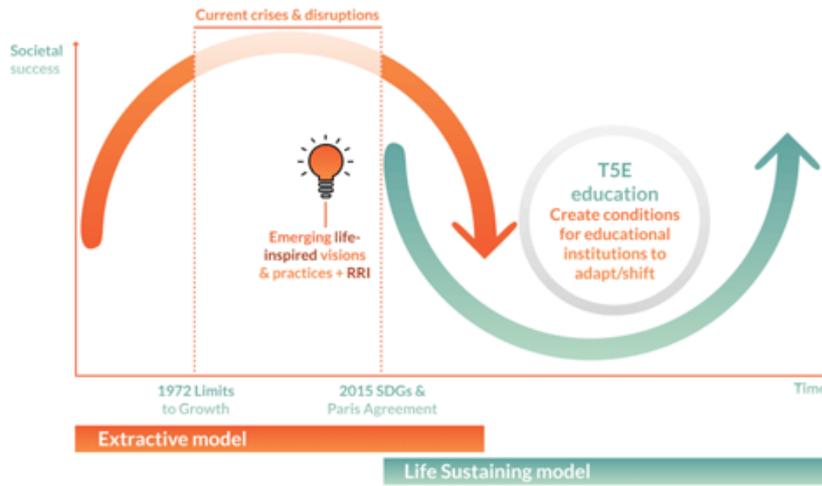


SDG progress report launches university into new territory.

University of Pretoria staff

In the publication of its first progress report on its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, the University of Pretoria is navigating new territory at the same time as it is acknowledging its clear stewardship role in protecting the environment and biodiversity.

Promoted by the University of Pretoria.



The 'New Human', 'New Society' and 'New Higher Education' audacious goals are within reach if we liberate ourselves from our reluctance to face up to the gap between what we know, and how we act in our personal, professional and political lives.

We are much better than how we are often prepared to show up as.

*James, GGM, *Stolen Legacy*, Online publication, 1954.

Mamphela Ramphela is co-president of the Club of Rome, former vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and former managing director at the World Bank. This is a speech delivered to the 13th Reinventing Higher Education Conference, co-hosted by Madrid's IE University and the University of Cape Town on 6 March in Cape Town, South Africa. The introduction has been edited slightly.

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UAE University staff

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