


Universities to consider integrated and multidisciplinary approaches as they revamp their role in solving societal problems



Universities in Africa have been challenged to consider integral and multi-disciplinary approaches when innovating solutions geared towards solving community challenges. This was during a webinar on Transforming university processes, systems and learning experience organized by Regional Universities Forum Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) on 31st May 2023.

In a keynote address he made, Prof. Francis Petersen, Rector and Vice-Chancellor, University of Free State, South Africa said that the challenges confronting societies today are becoming increasingly complex in nature and hence the need for practically implementable and sustainable integrated solutions; well aligned to a multi-disciplinary and/or a trans-disciplinary strategy that confronts communities and higher education sector from all angles of expertise, fields and contexts. “Through discussions and engagements like these, we can co-create knowledge and arrive at solutions that are more effective in addressing the challenges at hand. We can provide those solutions to not only individual institutions but to the entire higher education sector in Africa,” he said.

According to Prof. Petersen, the world today is constantly changing with visible increase in the inter-related challenges such as economic disparities, food insecurity, environmental degradation, climate change and political instabilities hence the role of universities as engines of social mobility and drivers of economy is more critical than ever.

He therefore stressed the need for universities to provide knowledge and skills across all sectors of development. To him, the mission for institutions of higher learning has shifted from purely being an academic focused to a more society focused role. And this calls for universities to use their core functions to engage communities in a scholarly fashion to address society needs and build powerful bridges between knowledge systems and cultural, social, political and economic spheres.

Highlighting the role of institutions of higher learning in generating universal knowledge, Prof. Petersen urged universities to continuously renew and reimagine themselves as a way of ensuring retention of vitality, agility and relevancy.

The world is living in a time of rapid and vast unprecedented changes, for example in the realm of technology and its influence. Workplaces requirements are in time of constant fluxes and it is vital that institutions via learning constantly evaluate and update themselves in order to produce graduates who are sought after at the global market place. This particular adaptability cuts across the universities teaching and learning practices, curriculum content and research focus. Prof. Petersen therefore called for the constant review of systems, policies

and processes to ensure institutional efficiency.

“As African universities, we should aim to grow, develop, and thrive. We should also continue to influence and impact the world both locally and globally. While celebrating the Africa Day on 25th May, as academia, we had an opportunity to reflect on Africa’s contribution to global knowledge and our focus was on how Africa knowledge can access their rightful place on the global platform,” he stated.

Reflecting on the emerging transformations at University of Free State, Prof. Peterson informed experts that adapting a society focused role spurred by the rapid growth and developments in technologies has led to the digitization of learning as well as the massification of higher education.

To him, more than ever, African universities must become spaces that encourage new ideas, controversy, inquiries and arguments to challenge orthodox ways of teaching. The covid 19 pandemic was a turning point for constitutions of learning and Peterson says there is need to re-evaluate and adopt to new changes and produce employable graduates.

The Webinar on “Transforming university processes, systems and learning experience” is part of the Transforming Higher Education Webinar series initiated by RUFORUM as pre discussions platforms geared towards the 19th RUFORUM Annual General Meeting (AGM) slated in October/November in Yaounde, Cameroon.

With the first one held in April 2023, the second Webinar on “Transforming university processes, systems and learning experience” explored the unfolding patterns within higher education in Africa focusing on often under-attended to issues. It sought to discuss the need to rethink university entry and admissions requirements and processes with intent to break the status quo that currently appears to ingrain inequality and exclusion.

Africa’s higher education has grown rapidly over the last two decades with more than double the number of students in the system. Most of this growth is driven by the completion of the full cycles of universal primary and secondary education. While entry into higher education ramped-up leading to massification questions of low quality of education, low levels of integration of the education with the economic and social sectors leading to persistently high unemployment among graduates as well as rising inequalities and exclusion at various levels.

According to Prof. Patrick Okori, the Executive Secretary, RUFORUM, Uganda, the underlying constraint in most African higher education institutions is that student numbers have not matched pace with teaching, infrastructure, personnel and financing resources. These limitations are pushing higher education institutions in Africa to perform dismally in global comparisons with strong intra-continent disparities.

Africa’s working age is growing at about 3% per annum and is expected to generate 450 million youth ready to work by 2035. The continent by 2050 will be the largest contributor to the human resources. With the largest population of working age the biggest question is where will they work?

Conversations on how universities and their graduates can become more relevant have intensified with the urge to reshape and transform the higher education systems and process and a louder call towards practical skills as a way of cubing down the rising edginess in the labor market is being enhanced.

In her welcome remarks, Prof. Florence Uphie Chinje- Rector, Université de Ngaoundéré, Cameroon, said there is need for higher education institutions in Africa to rethink and re-strategize how to embrace modernity with its advancement processes. To her, we live in a globally competitive world and shifts have overtime defined the importance of education and science in shaping modern societies that have increased between the 20th and 21st centuries.

Prof. Uphie Chinje also mentioned that science, innovation and technology have become the game changers in re-defining the job context across various economic sectors. She therefore challenged universities to be aggressive and committed to change and adapt to the emerging trends such as Artificial Intelligence driven learning, citing the ChatGPT app as the most common in institutions of higher learning.

“We need to change the ways and processes we deliver our learning services to students with the intent to break the status quo. Processes like admission, re-entry, and requirements need to be recalled,” she emphasized.

Pointing out the need for universities to build functional entrepreneurship structures and systems across universities, Matthias Moebius, Co-founded Start Hub Africa underlined the mismatch between the current and previous ways higher institutions of learning have been handled in the last decades.

“Years back, the curricular were basically tallied to transferring knowledge. Currently we need practical skills for the future. There is need to encourage students skilling programmes and Universities have a bigger responsibility to adjust their way of working and find ways to teach skills that can equip the future.” He said.

In a presentation he made on rethinking the higher education, Dr. Jimmy Spire Ssentongo a Senior Lecturer at Makerere University, was concerned about how most of the African Universities are purely exam oriented with their learning and teaching process streamlined to basically test the memory of students rather their abilities.

With reference to the looming debates in Uganda on the relevancy of natural sciences compared to social sciences, Dr. Spire Ssentongo noted that the contestation is not well framed to the extent that the response from universities is not calling for more discussions to direct the debate and highlight the relevance of all courses either in social sciences or natural sciences. “What universities are doing currently is to adjust and adopt the interests of the political will in this matter. Before will rethink the higher education we should be able to understand what education is, its purpose and the world it is targeted to,” he noted.

When speaking about Rethinking the entry/admissions into higher education: breaking status quo: Ariel Sánchez, Director of Admissions, EARTH University, Costa Rica reflected on how the Earth University adopted a new mission that prepares leaders with ethical values to contribute to sustainable development and construct a prosperous just society. According to him, the university has migrated to a competence based education model with a great focus on skills, ability and knowledge.

“Most African Universities use standardized tests to measure a student’s potential of achievement and the usual criteria is to admit students with the highest score,” Emphasizing the importance of creating an enabling learning environment for students, Prof. Justine J.

Namaalwa, Head MasterCard Scholars Program at Makerere University, cited the need for African universities to understand the increasing concerns and emerging needs to address the different risks and safety of students, staff and all the other stakeholders that operate within the institutional frameworks.

She therefore called upon universities to re-consider their social safe guards strategies towards inclusivity and diversity and encouraged them to have a holistic evaluation process in terms of compliance to the broader understanding of social safeguards.

“If we want these young people to have meaningful engagement at the university and come out as people that are skilled, equipped and ready to transform societies, they must thrive in an environment that is conducive,” she said.

Prof. Ernest Molua, Deputy Vice Chancellor at University of Bamenda, Cameroon, moderated the Webinar on “Transforming university processes, systems and learning experience”. It attracted primarily educators including; University Vice Chancellors, Rectors, Presidents, Principals and Deans of respective universities in Africa. It also drew the attention of development practitioners in education and development as well as researchers.