

Keynote Address: Reimagining the Future of Higher Education in Africa

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It is wonderful to be here and to have been asked to do the keynote address for this conference. I do so as a former founding member of ARUA, and now as Director (Vice-Chancellor if you like) of a university in the UK. I do it as an African, born and grown up on this continent, but one who now resides elsewhere. Through these multiple reconcilable identities - African and human, former ARUA VC and now a VC in the University of London system - I have become aware and want to highlight our global challenges and our collective responsibility as higher education leaders in different parts of our world to build the knowledge base and professional cohorts needed to manage both our national development needs and contemporary transnational historical burdens.

This is not a new message for all of you. I recall this same conversation, in slightly different words, at the ARUA conference in Nairobi in 2019. There we spoke of reconciling Africa's development needs with the international community's obligation to live sustainably on our planet. There we recognised that this was dependent on the development of a human resource base and an institutional higher education infrastructure that would require a new form of equitable partnership between our universities in Africa and those in Asia, Europe, and North America. At this ARUA conference were leaders of the UKRI - Andrew Thompson and team - and the Guild of European universities - Jan Palmowski and team - who heard the call and worked with Ernest and many of you to build two cutting edge partnerships. The first emerged relatively quickly but then partly unravelled with the exigencies of national challenges and politics, but the other persevered and continues to be developed.

Since this conference we have been through momentous global developments. We have had a global pandemic that required the world to shut down and all of our universities to pivot online, or more accurately to emergency remote learning. Since then we also have had multiple civil and regional wars that not only had multiple spill over effects through regional political instability and creating new generations of refugees, but we have also had dramatic impacts on food security - the availability and cost of food - and the roiling of energy markets. These wars have also polarised us even further as a human

community unravelling our fragile sense of collective humanity and threatening our global diplomatic and governance architecture.

Today we are even more imperilled, and our political leaders are not rising to the historical challenge we are confronted with as a human community. But are we colleagues, rising to the challenge? We are leaders of universities - institutions that are meant to pioneer knowledge beyond national boundaries - yet we are prisoners of national politics and economics. I work in a higher education system, one highly recognised in our world with an incredible set of universities, but which is significantly subsidised by charging international students, many from the Global South, fees that are between two and four times that of domestic students. We say that we have no choice because this is the policy architecture within which we exist. In some senses this is true. After all, even though I complain about this, I still implement the same international fees. But at another level can we not do more. Instead of defending a differential fee regime and high international fees on the grounds that students come to us because we are research intensive universities, would it not be better to recognise that the real reason most come is because a UK degree opens up employment markets in North America and Western Europe. It is inequality in our world that drives student mobility as much as anything else. And should we as leaders of higher education not be advocating against this business model of university and political economy of higher education because of the negative consequences it has for the institutional architecture of the global academy.

I have criticised myself and my colleagues in the UK, but this challenge applies to all of us in different ways. Our system of higher education and the parochial dynamics it breeds is no different from that of Australia, Canada, the US and even some parts of Western Europe. Frankly the same challenges confront many higher education leaders on the continent. Again, let me use the example of my own country. How different are the relations of the universities of the Anglo-Saxon world with those in the Global South from that of South African universities with their peers in the rest of the continent. Let us be honest, all of us are imprisoned by the national politics and political economy in which our institutions are embedded. This forces us to manage in a manner that prioritises our short-term survival as institutions, rather than our medium term responsibility to build equitable transnational relations that build the global knowledge base and professional capabilities across our world.

Things are not as bleak as I make them out to be. There are a number of initiatives underway in which some of us are trying to act in ways against the grain. Wits and SOAS have just launched a doctoral degree with a new business model and at a cost structure of £3800 with no international fee. We have a number of other such transnational teaching partnerships currently being explored. The University of Pretoria and Kings College have another teaching partnership on a different business model, but on a similar equitable basis. Evelyn Welch at Bristol University could speak of a few of their partnerships with African institutions, as can the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. It is also worth noting that ARUA and the Guild of European universities are pioneering a wide range of doctoral and research partnerships and ARUA also has several other Pan-African research and teaching partnerships among many of you.

We are in a far better place than we were, colleagues, but I fear these initiatives are still at the margins of our normal operations, and we are proceeding at a pace that is too slow for the challenges that we confront. This is why I underscore the challenge so starkly. Let me remind you of why these transnational teaching and research partnerships are so necessary.

Our historic challenges – pandemics, climate change, inequality, migration, social and political polarisation – are all transnational in character. Our ability to address these challenges is dependent on us acting as a collective human community. It is critical to our survival as a species. We must learn to swim together, or we will collectively sink. If we are going to address these transnational challenges, we need to bring knowledge systems from all parts of the world into conversation with one another. How we address inequality in Kenya will be fundamentally different to how we address it in the UK. How we address climate change in Korea will be different to how we do it in Germany. We could not have stemmed the Ebola outbreak in West Africa with a purely clinical approach – we needed a multidisciplinary lens to understand Muslim burial practices and how to adapt them to prevent the spread of the virus.

Such global solutions are thus dependent on local knowledge. Any intervention needs to be rooted in the cultural, social and political realities of its local context. This will require academics, scientists, professionals and other stakeholders to continuously engage and innovate across national and disciplinary boundaries, and in the process to adapt global solutions to local contexts. This is what it means to suggest that science should have no boundaries; it should be a continuous process of engagement between theory and application, between the universal and the local. This is a point which was powerfully made by Tania Douglas, the former chair of Biomedical

Engineering and Innovation at the University of Cape Town, who insisted on the centrality of context in the design of scientific technologies.

But formulating and/or adapting technologies to the contextual circumstances of the developing world is only one part of the challenge. The other is establishing the institutional infrastructure and developing the human resource capabilities to enable this to happen. We need more inventors, scientists, technologists, social actors, academics and students – in short innovators – to develop and adapt technologies for their circumstances. For this to happen we need enabling environments to stimulate this. We need universities and vocational colleges that train, research and innovate; companies that are entrepreneurial; incubators that can nurture new technologies; and venture capital networks that can sponsor these initiatives. At one level we recognize this. Our policies regularly speak of the importance of inclusive, and equitable and quality education. Yet we also institutionally behave in a manner that deepens inequalities and institutional divides. In this era of globalization, we have had more Global partnerships, more scholarships and more mobility across the world. Yet this has also been the period in which the brain drain has dramatically escalated.

This is because a significant number of countries in the Global North are explicitly recruiting international students from the Global South, charging them a premium fee, and thereby subsidising the costs of their higher education system. Sometimes we even enable this shift of resources from the Global South to the North in the name of development. This is also accompanied by a scholarship regime directed to talented individuals in the developing world, who then come to Europe and North America to acquire tertiary education. The assumption is of course that these students will return home. But the evidence of the last few decades is that this is not the case. When these students come here, life happens. They fall in love, they have families, they get jobs and stay. This is understandable. These students are moving in a moment of the human life cycle where partners are found and families are built.

Carlton University which investigates student mobility and graduate employment across the globe holds that large majorities of students do not return. North of 80% of students from the Indian sub-continent do not return home to pursue their careers, and until 2007, the figures were even worse for China. This negative trend was only reversed in China after 2007 when its government dramatically increased investment in its higher education and research system. The research on African student mobility is far more tentative given the paucity of national statistics but at a conference on the diaspora which I attended at the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2019, it was suggested that more than 80% of our students do not return. The notable

exception in Africa and Asia is Singapore. In all other cases the student mobility trend works to the disadvantage of countries of the Global South.

The corollary of this in the developing world is that institutions have been weakened, human resource capacities are weakening or are not being developed, and inclusive development is being compromised. Of course, some among us speak of brain circulation rather than brain drain, and the importance of remittances to the developing world. But, if we are honest, we would recognize that these are weak countertrends that do not fundamentally change the negative institutional and structural dynamics that accompany the brain drain and compromise inclusive development.

I must hasten to argue that I am not advocating for some autarchic retreat into nationalism, nationhood and ethnicity. I do not believe this is possible and I am of the view that the human spirit has simultaneously an impulse to wander and explore – globalise if you like – and identify and familiarize – localise if you need a term to describe this. These are not mutually exclusive agendas as populist and nativist parties tend to suggest. Instead, they can be complementary elements of a human existence. Every one of us has families and communities whom we identify with and love, but it need not dissuade us from caring about what happens to other members of the human community elsewhere in the world. We can love our families and community networks and still practice a human solidarity outside our familial networks. It is possible to be both local and global. Indeed this is essential in this era if we are meant to survive as a human species. What I am instead advocating, in line with the deliberations and decisions of the ARUA conference in 2019, is a new form of global partnership, one that is more rooted in institutions than in individuals. Among universities, it would involve co-curriculation, co-teaching and co-credentialing. It should be structured on an alternative business model and fee structure that opens up opportunities for new groups of students to get access to these joint academic degree programs. It is important that these programs are not entirely predicated on scholarships so that they are not terminated when donor money dries up. There has to self sustaining logic to the operational or business architecture of the programs themselves.

In essence colleagues, the argument here is not to stop the mobility of students but to complement it with institutional partnerships that enable training in the countries of the Global South. This transnational training must be undertaken not to compete with the universities in these countries, but in collaboration with them. The strategic purpose is to enable a continuous cycle of institutional development and learning, across the universities of our world, and in particular across institutions in the Global North and South. The central purpose is to bring higher education and postgraduate training to wider and wider social groups in the Global South, and thereby create the

basis and foundation for a more comprehensive universally responsive knowledge production system. Only then will we be able to address the global challenges of our time.

The great historic task of our historical moment is to develop institutional capacities and build human capabilities across the world to address our transnational challenges. This is the historic task that confronts us all. It is the historic task not only of politicians or political leaders, but also of university leaders across our world. Many of us may indeed have to navigate the challenge of institutional financial sustainability, but we must never undertake this responsibility in a manner blind to our historical obligation to build human capabilities and institutional capacities across our world.

Humanity's greatest economic, social and technological leaps have their roots in its darkest hours. We are indeed in one such dark moment. Significant parts of our world are plunged in war. Our planet is confronted with environmental collapse. Our economic systems are structurally unequal, and enable deep immiseration as much as they do incredible individual wealth. We as a human community have never been as polarised as we are. And yet our challenges require a universal collaboration, a collective human empathy, and an inclusive science and scholarship that is responsive to all of our interests across the world.

All of this seems so distant at present. But we as a human community have often grasped the mantle of innovation to overcome our greatest challenges in the most dire of times. This however has and will not happen without leadership and will. This ultimately is the greatest challenge that confronts us all. It is a challenge that we confront today as we begin the deliberations in this 4th ARUA International Conference at the University of Lagos.

Adam Habib

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