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AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INTEGRATION MUST GO TOGETHER WITH TRANSFORMATION. THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Note: The HAQAA Policy Briefs are written in the HAQAA-3 framework but engage only their authors. Emmanuel Ngara worked at a number of universities as a professor and university executive, the last being the University of KwaZulu-Natal (formerly University of Natal).

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INTRODUCTION

We all know “the Africa we want”: a prosperous continent with well performing economies, efficient and democratic governance, and a vibrant education system. But it is generally agreed that the African Higher Education (HE) system has not been sufficiently effective in facilitating the development of the continent as had been hoped. Therefore, its transformation is absolutely essential if it has to contribute to Africa’s development. The conclusion is indisputable: **African higher education integration must go hand in hand with its transformation. This is a systemic issue that must involve the whole higher education community and stakeholders. The questions addressed in this Policy Brief are about what higher education transformation in Africa entails, and what the role of university leadership is in promoting and spearheading it.**

THE IMPERATIVE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

The HAQAA Materials on African Regional and Continental integration in HE contain multiple references to the gravity of the problems negatively affecting African universities. In Chapter 9, Charmaine Villet notes that there are deep concerns over the quality and relevance most African students receive. In chapter 4, Juma Shabani cites one of the challenges to the implementation of the UNESCO Global Convention on the recognition of qualifications as “the deterioration of the quality of higher education from the 1980s onwards”. African higher education is included in this process of deterioration.

The plight of the African university was already depicted in 1996 in Chapter 7 of one of the most authoritative publications on African higher education (Ajayi et al 1996). There has been a sharp deterioration in standards due to a variety of factors, one of the chief ones being under resourcing, a major cause of which is the economic decline, or stagnation or insufficient growth, that has hit most sub-Saharan African countries. This has caused the authors to comment, “In fact, the first impression one gets of an African university campus in the 1990s is one of an all-pervading state of physical, managerial and intellectual dilapidation ...”. These comments were made in respect of the African university of the 1990s, but as the same authors predicted, this has continued into the 21st century.

It is noteworthy that the African university has been criticised, not just for the deterioration due to economic factors, but for its orientation as well. There was a lot that was done at independence to change the syllabuses of African higher education institutions to reflect African realities, and yet in some countries, such as South Africa, there has been an outcry for “Africanization” and “decolonization”. But the African university remains modelled on the Western European university, even if it cannot equally compete with it in terms of quality of degrees and the quality and quantity of knowledge production. To add to this deficiency is the issue of its identity. The argument is that the African university has remained a “transplanted tree”, not a tree that draws its inspiration from its own environment, i.e. not a tree “growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in the African soil”.

Ajayi et al show that a large measure of the plight of the African university is external in origin, such as the economy and governments not allocating sufficient funds to higher education; but they also point to the culpability of African universities themselves.

The need for transformation of African HE is undeniable. But transformation in a university cannot take place without leadership, without leaders or drivers who know what transformation is and entails. Consequently, in dealing with transformation that facilitates meaningful and effective integration, we should also address the issue of effective institutional leadership. It is necessary for university leaders to understand what transformation is and how it can be brought into effect.

WHAT TRANSFORMATION IN AN AFRICAN UNIVERSITY ENTAILS

An understanding of transformation in the context of higher education entails being aware of three dimensions of the concept:

- First, transformation entails a systemic and radical change which is much more than cosmetic change. The radical change suggests that something is not what it should be - that something is fundamentally out of sync with what should be, and consequently fundamental change is necessary.
- Second, in the university context, a useful distinction has been made between two “knowledges” – knowledge **of** transformation, and knowledge **for** transformation (CHE 2016):
 - Knowledge **of** transformation entails understanding what transformation is about,
 - whereas knowledge **for** transformation entails having knowledge of the institution or group of institutions where transformation is necessary. For example, what is the mission of the university? What are the cultures and practices in the institution that impede transformation? To what extent has the issue of transformation been addressed by the institution or group of institutions etc.
- The third dimension relates to ability to identify the areas of the university that should be targeted for radical change if transformation is to be effective and real. It is necessary to be specific about where in the structures, operations and orientation of the university transformation should take place.

When talking about transformation in the African university we should think in terms of positive change in the following areas in addition to the aspect of the composition of students and staff: graduate attributes, the curriculum (teaching, learning and degree structure), research and innovation, and culture.

LEVELS (OR ELEMENTS) OF TRANSFORMATION

1. *Graduate attributes*

In order to guide the operations at the various levels in contributing to the development of the graduate the institution wants to produce, the university community should agree on a set of graduate attributes that are relevant to the character and quality of graduate the institution intends to develop. A study of attributes developed by UK universities (Wong et al 2021) summarised the various attributes into four broad discourses of graduate themes.

Theme 1: Self-awareness & lifelong learning

Theme 2: Employability & professional development

Theme 3: Global citizenship & engagement

Theme 4: Academic & research literacy

For a transforming university learning from these examples and seeking to formulate attributes for its own graduates, it might be useful to consider inputs from various groups, including the executive management, faculties, academic departments and student organizations such as the SRC and clubs and societies. As a way of starting the debate, and taking a leaf from the idea of broad themes, I wish to suggest the following as possible themes that might be used to develop graduate attributes for an African university:

Theme 1: Awareness of African history, civilizations, philosophies and development issues

Theme 2: Awareness and understanding of key global and political issues of our time

Theme 3: Employability and workplace skills and behaviours

Theme 4: Ability to communicate effectively and to deal with modern technologies

Theme 5: Capabilities related to academic disciplines, research and innovation

Theme 6: Leadership, management and social service.

2. *Curriculum and degree structure*

Some guiding principles

Charmaine Villet's chapter in the HAQAA Materials aptly discusses a "transformational" approach to Curriculum design and implementation; and the third HAQAA Policy Brief also discusses this issue. Most of their arguments apply to our discussion. I would add the idea in *Learning to Lead for Transformation (Ngara 2022)*, which, in an African university curriculum content should meet at least two primary requirements: "First, it should be based on sound educational principles that have a general universal application in the particular discipline. Second, it should be appropriate to the African context and reflect an Africa-centred consciousness". In other words, in the 21st century, teaching and learning in an African university should put Africa at the centre, but learners should also be exposed to that which is good from both the West and the East. This entails having a new understanding of both globalization and Africanization, which in turn requires the development of a diversified epistemology, as opposed to the present approach to the curriculum which is based on an epistemology which, to all intents and purposes, is entirely Western in orientation.

Some weaknesses of the present approach

At curriculum level there are several factors that may be responsible for the fact that African universities are producing graduates who could be considered to have the following deficiencies: not sufficiently prepared for employment; not clear about their identity and role as educated

Africans; and not all equipped to play an effective role in their nations and the international community. These factors could include the following, among others:

1. Degree courses based on traditional disciplines that are not relevant to employment and to the needs and priorities of the relevant nations and the continent
2. Disciplines that are not sufficiently aligned to the mandate and mission of the institution and to the needs and desirable attributes of the graduates
3. Disciplines that do not speak to one another (i.e. the absence of inter-disciplinarity)
4. The accumulation of disparate credits that are based on what has been called “number crunching”, meaning the calculation of the required number of credits but which do not amount to a meaningful and coherent programme on which the relevant qualification is based
5. The absence of a clear academic leadership system that ensures the alignment of courses (i.e. modules), programmes and credits to the mission and vision of the university.

The need for General Education

Of course, students being prepared for different professions should be properly trained for their chosen areas of specialization. In other words, an engineer should be trained to be a qualified and competent engineer; a medical doctor should be sufficiently specialized in her /his chosen area of practice; a student of literature should be capable of reading and analysing literary texts; and a mathematician should know her/his trade etc. However, it is essential that a graduate from an African university, regardless of their area of specialization, should be educated about issues such as the following:

1. Where Africa is in development relative to other continents, and why this is so
2. The place and role of Africa in human civilization, past and present
3. Imperialism, colonization, decoloniality and independence
4. The current problems of Africa and possible solutions to such problems
5. Globalization in relation to Westernization, and the consequent effect on the cultures and identities of other nations, with special reference to former colonies and sub-Saharan Africa
6. Climate change and the impact on Africa and other regions: its causes and ways to address it
7. Technology and its impact on industrialization and on approaches to communication, teaching and learning
8. Ubuntu/Utu, community involvement and service
9. Leadership, teamwork, emotional intelligence and self-awareness
10. Research methodology and innovation.

Degree structure in brief

It is impossible to separate the discussions on Curriculum content and on Curriculum and Degree structure. To stimulate reflection and discussion on this, I dare suggest ideas already presented in an earlier publication (Ngara 1995) concerning an example of an appropriate degree structure in a transforming African university:

1. One (or two) disciplines or majors
2. Some courses from a second or third subject

3. General education courses, some of which could be compulsory for all students, and some optional.

The principles governing the proposed structure include the following:

- a) The disciplines under 1 and 2 above should not be taught and learned as distinct disciplines with no reference to related disciplines. Instead, there should be an interdisciplinary approach with students majoring in one subject getting insights from the other subject or subjects they are taking.
- b) The approach should not be teacher-centred with students only listening to the lecturer and regurgitating what comes from the lecturer in assignments and examinations. Instead, there should be a dialogical approach between teacher and students and students and students, so that students are free to contribute answers and solutions to the questions that arise from the topic.
- c) Inclusion of the following elements would enhance the effectiveness of the General Education courses:
 - The use of projects, case studies and collaborative research
 - Research projects to include participatory research involving interactions with people from rural villages and high density townships
 - Item 8 on the list of General Education courses highlights the need for understanding African philosophies, indigenous knowledge systems and community life, as well as the importance of engaging in voluntary service.
- d) As far as possible, students should be exposed to workplace environments as part of their job training. Students not majoring in subjects that require attachment should, as far as possible, be also exposed to workplace environments, and this could be done as part of service and voluntary work.

3. Research and innovation

The importance of research and innovation

Knowledge production is one of the key functions of the university. Development is largely a result of knowledge production and innovation. The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) has made this important comment (CHE 2016), “It is widely held that most successful societies in the future will be those that optimise the creation, distribution and utilisation of knowledge or information”. It is true that many universities in the world, not only in Africa, do not have the resources to conduct meaningful research. But absolutely all of them can generate innovation.

In a speech at the White House on 17 November 2010 (Obama 2010) Barack Obama defined innovation as follows: “Innovation – the process by which individuals and organizations generate new ideas and put them into practice – is the foundation of American economic growth and national competitiveness”. Obama is also supposed to have defined innovation in these words: “Innovation is the creation of something that improves the way we live our lives”. These two definitions complement one another. They refer to innovation as the creation of a new idea, a new process, a new way of doing things which, when put into practice, leads to development and the betterment of life. If there is something that Africa badly lacks and badly needs, it is innovation. universities should be the centerpiece of knowledge production and innovation in the nation in which it is located, turning the wheel of development in their countries and in the African continent.

Research and innovation management structure

The practice in many universities is to leave the initiative for promoting research and innovation to interested individual professors or academics. This could be in order if all was well with the pace of development in Africa. However, the fact of the matter is that for those who are concerned with the state of affairs on the continent, it is not inappropriate to say that looked at from the perspective of lack of development, Africa is in something of a crisis. The continent is known to be rich in natural resources, and yet the majority of the African people are the poorest in the world.

What this means, among other things, is that the university, as an agent of national and continental development, should wake up to the need to marshal all its expertise and resources efficiently in order to participate more effectively in the development project. In the topic under discussion, this calls for the introduction of coordinated and directed research. As already discussed in *The African University and its Mission* (Ngara 1995) and emphasized in the HAQAA Materials and Policy Briefs, universities must become **development agents**, mainly through the promotion of innovation. This mission brings together all university functions and allows them to access international funding on development cooperation beyond that specifically addressed to teaching and research. University leadership must promote and lead this perspective as a university policy: Universities are not simple conglomerates of individuals, research groups, departments or faculties.

4. Transforming Culture, Leadership and Management

At this level we are looking at what gives the university its character and identity. We are asking what philosophy, traditions and values; and what leadership and management practices and styles guide the operations of the institution? We are examining culture from two perspectives:

- First, does the university operate within a basically Western mode? Is it a tree transplanted from Europe, or does it reflect a true African identity? We are addressing issues such as colonization, neo-colonialism, decoloniality, Africanization and the extent to which Africanization can be pursued as a useful and guiding concept. We are also looking at the extent to which progressive traditional systems and philosophies are used in our institution.
- Second, we examine the way things are done in the university which either retard transformation and integration, or facilitate them. We examine both the hardware and software. The hardware: laid down policies, procedures, rules and regulations etc. The software: beliefs, attitudes and practices that have become part of “the way we do things here”, and which either hamper or facilitate new approaches to the way the organization operates.

An important area of culture is that of relations between different groups, e.g. between students and staff. Do we follow the banking concept of education or the problem-posing concept? Is there collaborative research or is our approach the individualistic competitive approach? Is teamwork and collaboration facilitated by our rules, policies and procedures in projects and research? Is there collaboration between students and staff in research in the spirit of Ubuntu?

The aim is to develop an institution that develops competent and capable graduates, is international, and is at the same time African in character. We can learn lessons from other nations. There is no contradiction in learning about higher education integration from the European Union and the experience of the European Higher Education Area, but implementing integration in a manner that promotes progressive African culture and traditions.

EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

1. The vision: Integration with transformation

The proposed transformation approach relates to the concerted efforts of the entire higher education community and stakeholders - But it will be difficult to achieve a clear understanding of the various aspects and levels of transformation just discussed in the absence of a strong leadership and an effective strategy. In this regard, leadership should be demonstrated at the various governance levels: the council, senate, faculty and school, and academic department. Most importantly, good, strong and effective leadership is required at executive level with the vice-chancellor as the key player, supported by officers such as deputy vice-chancellors, faculty deans, and chairpersons of schools and academic departments. To avoid a lengthy presentation, we shall focus here on the role of the vice-chancellor and her/his team.

The vice-chancellor and her/his team need to be aware of the integration issues discussed in the HAQAA Materials. They need to be involved in the integration processes and programmes of the African Union (AU) and the Association of African Universities (AAU). They will do well to be aware of the integration experiences of higher education in regions such as Europe and Latin America, and to use such experiences to inform their institution's transformation strategy. The vice-chancellor needs to be a woman or man of vision and influence who can lead the transformation of the university through the various processes and stages that are necessary for it to achieve its goal of, on the one hand, participating in the continental integration protocols and procedures; and on the other, becoming a new dynamic institution that plays its role effectively in the development of the nation in which it is located. I'll just outline a snapshot summary of the process involved, discussed at length in Ngara (2022)

2. The process

Stage 1: Developing a compelling vision

The vision is a clear picture of the desired future state when the institution has been transformed. It provides the members of the organization with a clear picture of what the institution wants to be, and becomes a rallying point which motivates those who work and learn in the institution work towards the achievement of the desired future state.

Stage 2: Developing and adopting the strategy

The strategy is the methodology used to achieve the desired future state. It consists of two key elements: the development of a strategic plan (a road map) and the setting of goals. (the short term or near term targets which, when achieved, enable the organization to achieve the desired future state).

Stage 3: Execution

It is widely known that a strategic plan can lie dead on the shelves of the leaders of the organization. Execution is needed. Execution as "the discipline of implementing a plan through

the practice of rigorously following strategies aimed at getting things done” (Ngara 2022). It comprises

- a) Leadership. The leader must know the behaviours that enable her/him to be effective in the implementation of the strategic plan.
- b) Changing organizational culture - namely, in the sense of “the way things are currently done”, inclusive of attitudes, beliefs, procedures and processes. .
- c) Knowing the people involved in the change process as well as those affected by the process, and knowing how to handle them.
- d) Translating the strategic plan into an operational plan that states the activities and targets that must be achieved when, by whom, and for how much in terms of the financing scheme.

In other words, in order to bring about the transformation that is necessary for HE to unfold all its potential to be meaningful and beneficial to Africa, you need Vision, Strategy and Execution. All three are necessary for the effective transformation of higher education in Africa; the whole higher education community and stakeholders must be actively involved in it and regional and continental integration must be functional to it. But it also requires dedicated and effective visionary leadership.

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