

Educating for Tomorrow's World: Reflections on Education for National Development

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One of the most popular Adinkra symbols is one of a bird that has its head turned backwards holding an egg in its mouth while the feet and torso are facing forward. The symbol is referred to as Sankofa which has often been translated to “looking back in order to build a stronger future.” Sankofa seeks to accentuate the maxim that one’s past is critical in framing, preparing, and understanding one’s future. I want to suggest that as the strategic Partnership for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) marks the end of its six-year tenure through this forum it is participating in its own Sankofa. This is because we gather here to look at SPHEIR’s accomplishments as well as the successes and foundations it has laid down for the future. These two days will be spent looking backwards at what the initial programme goals were, how they were implemented and accomplished, the successes and challenges registered, and a projection into the future of how the beneficiaries of the various partnerships are poised to make further positive changes in their spheres of influence.

I will focus my remarks today on four areas: first, I will highlight what I know to be the key areas of focus for the SPHEIR programme and how they relate to the prevailing needs of university education; second, I will share a few thoughts on some of the changes and disruptions that have occurred in the world and how they have influenced university education; third, I will suggest some ways through which universities can respond to the changes and disruptions; and,

¹ Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform. You can read more about SPHEIR here <https://www.spheir.org.uk/>

fourth, I will focus on how my own organization—the Commission for University Education—can support universities as they address the changes and disruptions.

A few months ago, I walked into an eye care shop in Nairobi looking to order a new pair of eyeglasses. I had not undertaken an eye exam at the facility and the last exam I had taken was a few years old. I wanted a new exam so that I could receive the right prescription of eyeglasses to cater for my needs. After making known the reason for my visit to the facility and ascertaining that my insurance would cover the cost of both the examination and the eyeglasses, I was ushered into a small room with the usual machines that I have seen in similar facilities and asked to wait for an optometrist to see me. After less than twenty seconds a young man in a white coat walked in and asked me to take a seat behind one of the machines. I have undertaken many eye exams in the past and coincidentally it has always been with optometrists who have had more than ten years of experience. I engaged the young man in a little chit chat as I usually do with anyone serving me and soon found out that he had just graduated from university a month before standing in front of me to check my precious eyes. Immediately my mind went into overdrive, generating all manner of questions—how much experience has this young man had to do this kind of work? Did his training include actual practicals? Am I his first patient? Does he understand the latest ways of checking for challenges in the eyes of a not so young person like me? And wasn't the university he said he graduated from in the news for some problems that it was facing? "Please place your chin here and look through the lenses" the young man told me as I turned my attention to him and away from my thoughts. I managed to smile probably as a mechanism to hide my questions from this young man who was now ready to carry on with his work. Within minutes my anxiety dissipated. He was undertaking his job with the same diligence and care that I had observed in my previous eye exams elsewhere. He was even asking similar

questions to the ones I have heard past examiners ask. He kept recording all my answers and turning the eye test machine to adjust to the power of my eyesight as we interacted.

Why am I sharing this story with you? It is easy to talk about the quality or nature of our education in statistical or other impersonal terms but when you become the subject of that education those statistics and terms don't really matter. Indeed, when the matter of education has to do with expertise that you do not possess and where you are dependent on someone else for your own health or survival the matter becomes extremely important.

As we reflect on the last six years of the work undertaken through the SPHEIR programme let us focus on what we know about our education systems, their strengths, their weaknesses and the opportunities that there are to allow us to make them what we wish them to become. Let us focus not only on the processes but also on the product. What kind of graduate do we want to produce? When I looked afresh at the different initiatives undertaken through the SPHEIR partnerships I noted the importance of each of the programmes in building the kind of education systems that are necessary for preparing the graduates we want to have for tomorrow's world. This is a world very different from the one that I knew when I was an undergraduate.

Allow me to spotlight the SPHEIR partnerships I am acquainted with and highlight how they are responding to the current needs of our university education:

1. The first one in on Quality education. To achieve quality in education there are many players and factors but it all boils down to having set standards to ensure institutions offer the right education in order to produce the kind of graduates that are fit for purpose. This calls for partnerships between multiple players—from universities, to employers, to students, to regulatory bodies—which is what was introduced in Sierra Leone through the Assuring Quality Higher Education project.

2. The second one has to do with diverse modes of delivering education to provide students and teachers an opportunity to learn from and teach in diverse contexts. This is especially important in our constantly changing world and also in a context where we have limited resources. The PEBL project which the Commission for University Education has had the honour of leading is one such project. When the PEBL project started there were very few institutions that signed up but once Covid-19 hit many institutions scrambled to seek to be enrolled in the programme. Such a programme will ensure that a student in Kampala can have access to expertise provided by a professor in Dodoma, Bujumbura, Kigali or Nairobi.
3. The third spotlight is on making higher education relevant and responsive to the changing needs of industry and society. We cannot prepare graduates the same way we did twenty or even ten years ago; our world is rapidly changing, and we need graduates who are ready to adjust to those changes. What our graduates need are tools to ask good questions, tools to prepare them question and scrutinize any information provided, and tools to help them work with others to come up with responses to challenges even those challenges that they have not encountered before. The Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) programme was specifically developed for helping students learn “how to think” instead of “what to think.” As you know our education system primarily prepares students to look for answers asking such questions as “is this going to be in the exam?” Instead, they should learn how to ask questions and build the creativity that is needed for the unscripted world of tomorrow.
4. The fourth issue I wish to spotlight is access and affordability of higher education, which is critical for creating a just and equitable system that assists even the most marginalized

in society. Cases of populations affected by war which adversely influence access to education are quite common in today's world. We are today meeting when many people are facing such challenges in the current Russia's invasion of Ukraine. How do we provide opportunities for displaced people to access education? We have seen how this can be done in the case of students in Jordan and Lebanon who had the chance to get an education that they would otherwise not have had a chance to be part of. This was done through the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA). The question we need to focus on when dealing with displaced peoples is not just how we get people to the table but also how we make sure they are well equipped to participate in the activities going on at the table.

5. My final spotlight is to emphasize that all these issues raised above cannot take place if we do not have good teaching; the kind of teaching that was spearheaded by the PEDAL project. Good teaching entails not only subject matter expertise but the ability to understand students, their learning styles and generally how people learn, the needs of society and industry, and an ability by teachers to be self-reflective, to name but a few. With the right teaching and resources to support that teaching we are able to produce a student ready for tomorrow's world. What I am calling tomorrow's world is a world that requires a graduate who has critical thinking skills, communication skills, ability to work with diverse teams, ability to deal with ambiguity, ability to take big data, make sense of it and use it to solve real problems in society, and of course a curiosity that leads to lifelong learning and self-improvement.

With these in mind, ladies and gentlemen, we now need to ask ourselves how these partnerships developed under SPHEIR have laid a firm foundation for building the muscles needed to carry

on with the work in order to support the development goals of our nations and societies. Let me however point out that any gains made through the SPHEIR project cannot have much life if the education systems supporting them are not strong and resilient.

Our systems have been thoroughly tested in the last few years, not to mention the current challenge brought by the Covid-19 Pandemic. How strong our education systems are can best be gauged when we look at how they withstand change. We all happen to have been witnesses to the challenges brought to us by Covid-19. Interestingly, Covid-19 was not just a health challenge but a mirror that has been held up to us to check and reflect on the utility and value of our structures and practices especially in our education systems. The global processes and structures that we built to enhance exchange of goods, ideas, and even knowledge, seem to have been exploited by the pandemic to wreak havoc on humans. The globalization that we have used as an example of progress has become the same avenue through which we have learned of our vulnerabilities as humans. The pandemic has brought forth the need for having strong local infrastructure and systems, systems geared towards addressing local issues even as they cast their sight to the external. If my education is not applicable to the needs of my immediate society then it needs to be re-evaluated and restructured to first address local issues, before expanding to the global sphere.

Ladies and gentlemen, besides challenges brought by Covid-19 we are also going through the ever-changing world of technological advancement. The sheer generation and distribution of massive amounts of information threatens to undermine the very core of academia that relies heavily on peer review processes. Today all one needs is access to a social media platform and quickly spread information (including falsehood that once forwarded multiple times starts to become truth). The first thing a student does when given an academic question is not go to the

library (including remotely) but consult their popular search engine where much of the information is not verified by experts. Students born in this age have been physiologically and emotionally affected by these technological changes. They are more easily distracted, they are less able to focus, abhor working in teams, and often unable to complete tasks.

There are some things we can do, however, to prepare for these and other changes and disruptions in our education ecosystem.

Over ten years ago, in January 2012 Dr. Lawrence Summers, former president of Harvard University, wrote an opinion piece for the New York Times that addressed the world of university education that we find ourselves inhabiting today.² Dr. Summers called on universities to change the way they teach so as to fully embrace technology and adapt to the ways in which people learn. To support his views, he provided some key points including three propositions on how Universities could change the way they deliver their mandate in order to match the rapid changes taking place in the world and which directly affect education. I want to use the following propositions made by Dr. Summers to challenge us on how we undertake our work moving forward:

1) Today our education is more about how to process and use information than how to impart information. Indeed, today “Professor Google,” or any other search engine, has more information on academic topics than any one of us can acquire in our areas of expertise over a lifetime. The question is no longer who has the most knowledge but who knows best how to manipulate that knowledge for best results. Teachers are no longer going to wow students with how much they know (except in places where resources are limited, and students will mostly get their knowledge from the teacher);

² See article here <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/education/edlife/the-21st-century-education.html?pagewanted=all>

2) As we move forward, we will need more collaboration in carrying out tasks will be the new way of working. The idea of a lone buffalo working at the corner in a competitive education system that rewards only a few will no longer be tenable in tomorrow's world. Not only is there need for collaboration within a discipline but also across disciplines and even across different sectors. The SPHEIR partnerships programme has demonstrated this by bringing different countries, organizations and institutions, to partner in accomplishing a shared outcome. The challenges of today's world are too complex to be solved by one or two approaches or entities. Students will need to be inculcated into a new culture of seeing their colleagues not as competitors but as collaborators. A story is told of an anthropologist who had been studying the habits and culture of a remote community in Africa. He had been working in the village for quite some time and the day before he was to return home, he put together a gift basket filled with delicious fruits from around the region and wrapped it in a ribbon. He placed the basket under a tree and then he gathered up the children in the village. The man drew a line in the sand, looked at the children, and said, "When I tell you to start, run to the tree and whoever gets there first will win the basket of the fruit." When he told them to run, they all took each other's hands and ran together to the tree. Then they sat together around the basket and enjoyed their treat as a group. The anthropologist was shocked. He asked why they would all go together when one of them could have won all the fruits for themselves? A young girl looked up at him and said, "How can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?"³ This story has done many rounds on social media and the web. I have not been able to fully establish its authenticity but whether the story is true or not it provides an important lesson for our education for tomorrow. The education will not be based on competition for a few slots available in the next tier but will be based on

³ Story can be found here <https://jamesclear.com/how-can-i-be-happy-if-you-are-sad> and here <https://stjameswnc.org/meditations-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic-ubuntu/>

realizing that there is value in each of the students' abilities and perspectives and that each has a piece to contribute to the bigger goal. For sure this will pose a challenge because assessment in education tends to be geared towards individuals. Ways of rewarding collaboration and partnerships will be critical for preparing graduates who value such collaboration in the workplace; and

3) Finally, the third proposition Dr. Summers gave talked about the profound altering of the way knowledge is conveyed due to new technology. Technology is allowing us to listen to songs we are studying, to watch body organs we are studying in real time, to finding out more about an individual who has applied for a position in our company, and revised existing records immediately new information is established. How do we work with traditional modes of education within such dynamic technological changes? How do we adjust to these changes? SPHEIR has provided answers through the few programmes it has selected to spearhead and support in the last six years.

Let me now bring my focus to my own circle of influence—the regulator of universities. To achieve the kind of quality of graduates needed for tomorrow's world where a regulator like the CUE has to not only be guiding but also supporting. We need to reflect on our role in this changing terrain. Quality assurance in university education is two pronged—internal (carried out by the institution in the belief that it is quality education offering that gives the institution credibility) and external (carried out by the regulator to assure the stakeholders of the value of that education offered by the university).

The Changing Nature of Quality Assurance

When the Covid-19 Pandemic made it hard for institutions to meet face to face exactly two years ago today, we as a regulator were faced with a challenge. The Commission had all along had some guidelines for Open Distance and Online learning. But given the predominance of the face-to-face teaching, the guidelines were neglected and had not been fully developed. Universities were about to complete their semester and send students home for Easter holiday. They needed to do something to make sure the students did not lose their momentum. They turned to CUE, asking what to do. We guided the institutions to engage in Emergency Remote Teaching to complete the teaching that was cut short by the nationwide closure. We had questions about the quality of that kind of learning, but we had to do something. John Maxwell in his book on leadership titled *No Limits: Blow the Cap Off Your Capacity* argues that sometimes when you want to fly you may need to jump and build the wings along the way. That is what we did. We allowed institutions to use whatever resources they had to ensure they completed the semester. Some universities did not miss a day of learning because they quickly turned to their virtual teaching and learning infrastructure. Others closed shop and went home to wait for Covid-19 to pass.

At the Commission we did not go to sleep. We surveyed universities to understand their level of preparedness to meet the new demands of teaching and learning and then together we embarked on building what we later termed benchmarks for Online Distance and e-Learning (ODeL). The benchmarks were to guide institutions in preparing themselves for accreditation to offer teaching and learning in alternative modes besides the traditional face-to-face. The exercise was a true partnership between the Commission and universities because we engaged key experts from local institutions over a period of three months to help develop the basic structures needed

for ensuring that teaching and learning in that mode was as good as what most have been used to in the traditional mode.

We also hosted meetings with university leaders through which experiences were shared on how each institution was experiencing and responding to the challenges brought by Covid-19 and some of the lessons being learned. It was important to keep talking to each other and encouraging each other because we were all facing a challenge no one had a clear blueprint on how to deal with. These meetings helped reassure university leaders that they were not alone and that these were opportunities to work together. A number of lessons were learnt in the process including:

1. A reassessment of the value of investing heavily in brick and mortar. One vice chancellor stated that “We have to diversify our learning so that even if Covid-19 is contained we continue with some of the new ways of teaching and learning that have emerged including engaging new thinking on how to use our existing physical spaces and reflect on how many we need.”
2. The true value of faculty in sustaining a university. The key role played by faculty in keeping the university alive was not lost to many.
3. Opportunities for holding meetings online that would ensure higher participation and include experts based elsewhere. One vice chancellor noted, “There are some opportunities that Covid-19 has shown us—in the past it was quite laborious and even expensive to engage guest speakers in our universities because we had to probably fly them from their home countries and accommodate them then give them some honorarium. Now we can engage them without them leaving their homes and this saves on time and money.”

4. Expanding opportunities for different learning and teaching styles. As one vice chancellor said The Covid-19 pandemic was “a watershed moment because jobs of the future will be in technology and many will be accessed and transacted online. And yet when you ask many lecturers to teach online they were reluctant until Covid-19 hit and everyone is eager to learn. This is our moment to train everyone to get online.”
5. It was necessary to keep engaging students because with the switch to online platforms as a dominant way of delivering learning why would we expect our students not to seek education elsewhere, especially away from our nation?
6. And that universities become more relevant when they find solutions to simple challenges facing their immediate communities. A vice chancellor shared that “This is the time to entice industry to show them what universities can do because we have already demonstrated we can respond to national emergencies by offering practical solutions.”
7. How do we pay more attention to the emerging issue of mental health and assist not only students but also staff members to cope with disruptions?

We also are learning our own lessons as a regulator. We are now attuned to the reality of the changing nature of accreditation and quality assurance in university education. Besides reemphasizing the critical role played by universities as engines of quality we ought to reflect on how best we can place the student at the center of the quality assurance value chain. Indeed, our current strategic plan (2019-2023) places the student as our key stakeholder. This means that we change our approach to quality assurance from the current focus on a check list to be completed for compliance to set targets to one focused on emphasizing the product or outcome of the training that the university is engaged. That way we can be asking such questions as: what kind

of graduate is the university producing? How well are students being prepared to undertake their assignments in the world of work? Are the faculty contributing to national development through their research and patents? How well are communities being served by universities? Answers to these questions can move the Commission to focus more on outcomes while streamlining processes that support such outcomes. It also means that quality assurance and accreditation will be on a sliding scale—well established institutions should be led through a different process that honors their experience and ability to have their structures and outcomes more attuned to the expected outcomes seen in their graduates. Newer or younger institutions that have not yet proven themselves should have to undergo a more rigorous process to make sure they build the necessary structures to produce the kind of graduate needed.

Further, the regulator should seek to make the accreditation of programmes less time consuming by giving institutions more leeway to determine the quality of their programmes and have the Commission confirm the quality of those programmes based on agreed upon/set guidelines. In this case institutions would be asked to prepare programmes against a rubric provided by the Commission after which the programmes will be submitted to the Commission for confirmation (an exercise that should not take more than a month to complete) and the institution allowed to offer the programme. To ensure quality the Commission would then undertake random checks on those programmes to make sure they are aligned to the expected quality standards.

Finally, universities should be allowed to articulate their specific learning, teaching, research, and service goals and the Commission then acts as an accountability partner holding the institutions to account regarding those stated goals. This will allow institutions to generate their own unique identities instead of the current practice of asking all universities to fit into one

type. The question the Commission would be asking the institution is “how does this promote teaching learning, research, and service?” These suggestions are currently in place but on a limited scale. There is need to amplify them especially as our quality assurance systems comes of age. Let me remind you that the Commission is the oldest state sanctioned quality assurance agency in Africa and we have developed structures that should now reflect the kind of maturity in accreditation noted above.

Overview

As I conclude my remarks, ladies and gentlemen, let me note that I have highlighted the key programmes and/or partnerships that SPHEIR has had for the last six years. I have also looked at the disruption and changes that have come the way of university education, how universities can respond and how we at the Commission for university Education can assist. As I end my remarks let me go back to the story of the young optometrist. I ended up receiving excellent service at the eye care shop and my fresh graduate optometrist did a fantastic job. And I have had these glasses for two months now and I couldn't be happier.

It was in that experience in that eye exam room with the young optometrist that I was convinced of the need to build a value chain in our education system that allows us to start with the end in mind. Asking ourselves what kind of structures, processes and practices do we need to produce that kind of an optometrist? For me the proof of our education system is in its graduates, and I know that the SPHEIR partnerships have been working closely with institutions and participants to realize that goal.

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.