Pegging African Education for Relevance and Afrocentricity

There is, somewhere in the vast body of literature, the story of a geriatric, retired captain who once lived on an island off a remote coast, but within sight of the mainland. The correct time was so precious to this man that he would fire off a cannon to mark noon of each day by his trusty wristwatch. The villagers on the mainland would listen for the distant rumbling boom to set their own less trustworthy timepieces and plan their day. The captain and a fishing boat crew navigating the intervening waters, usually caught sight of each other as the former set off to trigger his cannon. One morning, in a panic, having forgotten to wind his wristwatch and knowing just how valuable his contribution was to the times of the area, the captain settled upon recovering the time. He reasoned that he only had to look out for the fishing boat that appeared at about the same time and place to correct his time. No sooner had he sighted the boat, than 'boom!' went the cannon. The boat crew adjusted their timepieces; the islanders rejoiced at the thunderous rumble, and life moved on as usual. This story ended with the rhetorical question: who has the correct time?

This anecdote, whether a true or a fictitious account, underscores a fundamental flaw in the post-colonial educational system. The system may have listened passively for the distant booms of perceived relevance to adopt the academic curriculum in the local setting, and without much adaptation. The chain of events set in motion is congruent to the unwitting villagers going about their daily business, unwary of being potentially beneficiaries of the incorrect time. The nature of education, particularly tertiary, demands a universality of ideas, which necessitates global alignment of curricula, teaching and learning approaches, research, and so on, with the best

practices. The main questions for a given curriculum would then be – what are the specific relevant outcomes for the area? What are the contexts available to interpret the curriculum in such a way that the needs of the area are addressed? These questions, asked at the graduate level, are not unrelated to the challenges of employability of the products of the system, whether human resources or research outputs.

Today's world is governed by data. Data can be thought of as an unavoidable consequence of the agglomeration of ideas. Data leads to measurement, and measurements are only meaningful in the presence of good metrics. Metrics lead to decisions, which in turn should ultimately lead to revisions. Now more than ever, the generation and proliferation of ideas must, therefore, be recognised as being central to all present and future human endeavours. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on the correct ideas and the best processes and practices for their dissemination, which have been the biggest casualties of post-colonial education. This may not be surprising, because the inborn and innate mechanisms that convey ideas are eventually culled, having run through ill-defined cogs and belts of the inherited system. It is arguable whether the entire production chain is compromised from the onset in the formative stages of post-colonial education, starting from the demands placed on that of the most basic of all societal requirements for any human being – language. The insistence on the mastery of a language other than that which the young learner encountered literally from conception to pre-primary as the mode of learning and interpretation of the world around may be one of the most brutal, if cruel acts to the African child. For one, the rather sudden change in the native vocabulary to one that is essentially alien forces a severe reality. The shift in the paradigm, surely, must have far-reaching consequences on the young mind still grappling with mother tongue. An illustration of

this impact can be appreciated in a university classroom where basic semantic analysis of a new word fails because the roots of the word are not known. Yet, the native speakers of the language of the new word implicitly understood it much earlier on in their lives. Certain basic concepts in the sciences revolve around an interplay of words. In the physical sciences, for instance, one hears of diffraction, refraction, reflection, interference, and so on. These words on their own have spawned vast research areas and are central to almost all the advances in engineering. The native speaker will be intuitively conversant with the aspects of these words, while the non-native speaker may not be fully comfortable with them, even at the point of graduation. From the outset it is almost comical, but personal experience in the physical sciences bears this out. Therefore, the argument that some have propounded that only a rudimentary understanding of the new language is all that is needed for the broader societal progress could not be more inappropriate. There is no shortage of illustrations for the most highly industrialised and first world nations of the world that have long realised the psychological importance of home language as the basis for constructing their future. This failure should not be taken as an indictment of the less successful societies, i.e., that they do not recognise the importance of language. It is just that the technical challenges of addressing the language diversity within the low education budget may prove too daunting for an under-capacitated educational policy maker. It may be closer to the truth to pronounce it as a lack of willpower. And, so, the immobility in language as a real tool for industrial and scientific progress remains.

Language is not the only aspect in need of a closer relook. The power of the established media and its precept formulas for news, entertainment, and general information are now being tested strenuously almost daily. The explosion in the avenues available for these ends by the rapid

growth of the unregulated internet means that there are essentially no filters for what is true and what is not. Over the past few years, with the political upheavals around the world – from the Arab Spring to the US elections, to the rise of strongmen of politics – the predominant new phrase in the media is 'fake news.' Even apparently innocuous entertainments on trusted media such as television or radio are apt to shape the national psyche in a way that education often cannot. The growth of violent television dramas which, though often mandating age restrictions but have no enforcement mechanisms in the home, have lowered the threshold for violence and other behaviours, thus sanitising and normalising them. This may account for why young tertiary students, expected to be the best minds and future leaders, have in the past few years turned to violence as a means of having their demands acceded to. Media is constantly engaged in a competition for dominance and prominence. To a degree it is understandable since they are modelled on business. In the new age of the internet, they have suffered a knock in influence and profits. Fringe stories seem more common, feeding on the sentiments of the very young by projecting all kinds of impressions of what is truly important. Thus, the education of the young mind stands to be shaped by the media in a manner that rivals, and perhaps even reverses the gains of higher education. Much is often written about corruption as endemic particularly to Africa. In spite of the common connotation of corruption in a monetary or material sense, by definition, the word `corruption' is synonymous with 'rot', 'unprincipled', 'amoral', 'venal', 'iniquitous', and 'dirty', to mention just a few. Corruption, therefore, occurs at many levels and impact processes within the human being and organisations. In the human being, which is a microcosm of societal organisations, it originates in thoughts, choices, and behaviours. In organisations, therefore, one expects to see a magnification of these microtrends, particularly in

the presence of power and authority. How does one ingrain in the young mind to circumnavigate these trappings of corruption?

Universities and tertiary institutions once held an authoritative moral high ground on many issues and were synonymous with truth and uprightness. They were the seats of various schools of thought upon which governments and decision makers fell back with alacrity by default. This had all but guaranteed their funding and survival. In recent times, this esteem has been eroded, and the beneficiaries are now faced with daunting prospects. In the scramble to continue to exist, many have scrambled to revise their curricula, placed moratoriums on staff hiring at certain levels, raised student entry requirements in the hope of getting fewer students, and in instances even changed their operating models towards simplistic business-like models – all in an attempt to stem the reversal in revenue fortunes and streamline financial operations. The coronavirus pandemic has crowned their prior weaknesses and inertia in adapting to change, as funding priorities shift away from training and research to other sectors. In short, to remain relevant, African universities must overcome their rigidity and adapt. Here too, internet-based technologies offer great opportunities for adaptation. The popular scientific network called ResearchGate graphically represents an alarming, dynamic report that shows that the bulk of collaborative efforts emanating from African countries occurs with North America and Europe. By its very nature, collaboration happens when the subject matter is current and of interest to both parties but is skewed towards the interests of the funding party. It is, therefore, implicit that the funds come from elsewhere to solve the problems outside Africa, using African brainpower. By extension, the solutions are sold back to Africa in a painful double taxation. At this point, one can ask another rhetorical question: how can this be changed to benefit Africa?

The afflictions wrought by poverty, and wilful ignorance and iniquity on African society are a monumental challenge. This short opinion piece is not an indictment, but a call to recognise the importance of the unique position of African universities to guide public thought and foster real Afrocentric progress. The series of rhetorical questions acknowledge that African universities possess the power but must develop the will to propel the continent to new prominence in this new age. They are the right place to encourage new, earnest, and honest conversations; to mandate inter-African collaboration through honest, unflattering looks at ourselves and our failings, for the love of Africa.