We have to turn theories and knowledge into action

The time has come for higher education in Africa to go beyond theories, and move promptly towards transformative action. **Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers**, incumbent of the DST/NRF South African Research Chair in Development Education, says key amongst the obligations of the public intellectual, as the “world’s eye”, should be to preserve great ideas of the past, to communicate them, and to create new actionable ideas.

“This communication should be to the world, and not just to fellow intellectuals. Africa needs intellectuals who are able to see the link between science and citizenship, democracy and epistemology, cognitive justice and peace, and superimpose them on governance issues.”

Passionate about developing African intellectuals, increasing African knowledge production, and finding African solutions to African challenges, Hoppers spoke to eNews on the role of the chair and its plans and progress in addressing such subjects, as well as on Unisa and higher education’s responsibility in continuing to shape futures on the continent.

As Unisa acknowledges 140 years of shaping futures in Africa in 2013, the university also celebrates its future, where it aims to be a leading global centre of excellence in science and research, and a university that produces adept graduates who can lead the continent in development and transformation.

Knowledge generation and transformative heuristics

With this in mind, Hoppers says another imperative of higher education is the generation of knowledge that has "transformative heuristics". “In this way, we would, in a systematic manner, be able to develop cognitive instruments (codes) for deciphering the ‘erasure cryptogram’ that hierarchised and deleted Africa from the global collective memory as a positive and substantive contributor to world civilisation and reduced it to a wasteland of deprived millions eternally waiting for ‘help’ from the west.”

As Africa is faced with numerous challenges – poverty, gender inequalities and military use of children, amongst others – higher education, through research and innovative ideas such as this chair in development education, plays a fundamental role in creating suitable African leadership.

The right diagnosis brings the right prognosis and action, says Hoppers. “African leaders and intellectuals must not take education (broadly defined) like any sort of discipline. We must see our goal as moving beyond disciplines, beyond subjects, to connecting with life and life processes through deep reflection on content, methods, theoretical frameworks and paradigms. We must move to the life worlds, and we must make what we do into ‘life statements’, seeking to promote mentoring over teaching. I repeat it just for the files, that teaching imparts information and some degree of knowledge, while mentoring imparts skills.”
Africa’s reclaiming of human agency

She says if the African perspective should entail delineating a distinctive conceptual and analytical lens, and demarcating a mental position or plane of projection from which a wide variety of issues are viewed, reviewed, judged, or propositions for new visions or directions are made, intellectuals and researchers have to deepen their current way of thinking, and look where no-one has looked.

“Africa’s reclaiming of human agency, and of her status in world citizenship as a subject and not an object, requires a broad range of strategies. The 21st century will be one in which the political freeing of the continent from various strands of colonial control as an act linked with the attainment of political sovereignty transforms and metamorphoses into being free as a creative act of the spirit.”

However, says Hoppers, in order to realise this, the dysfunctions of modern and European-programmed notions of progress have to be confronted. “It needs us (African intellectuals) to become critical explorers of human and societal possibilities and to establish new evaluation and appraisal criteria towards the transformation to new futures. We need to look beyond the regulatory rules and fish deep into the constitutive rules seeking to find out the way systems – including the academia, political and economic systems that had been shoved onto us – really work.

“We need to find out how our indigenous peoples can reclaim custodianship over their knowledge in public spaces along with the right to speak and be determining agents of cooperative contemporary change. We need to make up our minds whether the adults, standing as they do between the past and the future to be built, will look into the future, and make that crucial distinction between producing more offspring, and producing offspring that are not crippled,” says Hoppers. The SARChI Chair in Development Education, she adds, works towards such change, and believes in building capacity for trans-disciplinary, basic and applied research in support of Africa’s development.

The chair’s focus and contributions

As a strategically focused knowledge and human resource intervention into the South African higher education system, the chair focuses on new pedagogy in academic research and citizenship education, which takes human development as the goal, and its exploration through research, postgraduate teaching and community engagement seeks answers to some of the most taxing questions about development, knowledge production and science.

Hoppers, who in 2008 pioneered in Africa the then emerging field of development education, explains the chair’s importance. “…Looking deeply in taking up this chair, what I saw was that Africa was going through was the agonies of ‘the ethical space’ … Africa’s version of development, its codes, its ethics, and its norms, was never taken seriously, even after independence.”

Hoppers saw in Unisa, with its Operational Plan, a capacity to develop indigenous scholars, which, in time, would provide the kind of leadership required for the continent. She focused development education on two end perspectives – the conditions of integrating indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into the academy, into ethics and into the codes of the western academy, and the responsibility of African academe in this regard. “I made up my mind that I was going to be part of this mega-project, generate leaders who adapt, and know the ‘pin codes’ and the constitutive rules of the game. Leaders who, in their own way, depending on where they were sitting, can understand and do something about the toxic cultural impasse that has generated resentment on a global plane. I saw in the ethical space a precarious and fragile window of opportunity that exists for critical conversations about race, gender, class, freedom and community.

“Therefore I placed my chair to respond to that space, with that moment of possibility – to create substantial, sustained, ethical and moral understanding between cultures … I succeeded in creating a space in which dialogue about intentions, values and assumptions can be brought out and negotiated without duress. I succeeded in creating a two-way bridge of awareness building and understanding in which values, motivation and assumptions are brought to bear, and at last, dialogue on issues of plurality and diversity of knowledge, as well as ‘dialogue around ownership, control, and benefit of those knowledges can be undertaken’.”

The SARChI Chair in Development Education: Turning theories and knowledge into action
Under the leadership of Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers, the Department of Science and Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF) South African Research Chair in Development Education has gathered 25 transformative intellectuals – emeritus professors in theoretical physics, law, economics, science, and education in undertaking the chair’s task. Students have been placed before distinguished fellows of the chair. Out of the 19 students who joined in 2009/2010, seven passed in the 2012/2013 academic year. The chair also launched the Taproot Series - a vehicle through which transformative and cutting edge ideas from leading thinkers across the disciplinary spectrum have been incubated within the chair and will be published. It was submitted and approved by Unisa Senate in February 2013. Eight manuscripts are ready to be published by Unisa Press. In 2011, the chair established an International Indigenous Advisory Faculty. The then Minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor and Unisa Principal and Vice-Chancellor Professor Mandla Makhanya officiated at the launch. The chair has also been appointed by the DST to be the official mediator in bringing scientists and indigenous holders of knowledge together for a five-year term starting in 2012. In its fifth year, the chair was able to strengthen the three intellectual pillars on which it rests: local knowledge-development, student learning and international scholarship. In addition it became actively involved in a fourth pillar – policy making in research and higher learning. The four pillars have interacted productively throughout the five years and in particular during the chair’s annual retreat. Today, six universities have joined the SARChI Development Education approach to leadership building.

In addition to the above, in the chair’s first five years, a number of methodologies have been developed as a response to its research focal areas:

- **Transformation by enlargement**: This methodology challenges modernity (and the disciplines which it have created), and confronts it with the knowledge it has omitted from the knowledge-producing arenas.

- **Cognitive justice**: This deals with the diversity of knowledges. It combines with Transformation by Enlargement in providing a framework for the plurality of knowledges to co-exist without duress.

- **Transdisciplinarity-in-action and leadership building**: This methodology addresses the transformation of the disciplines, in terms of the knowledge that will be produced, and confronts the structures of the disciplines in terms of its exclusiveness/inclusiveness of the concerns of cognitive justice and plural knowledge systems.

- **Immersion**: Immersion is a methodology that offers scholars, as change agents, the tools to effect change through expanding their cognition Africa-wards and humanity-wards.

- **Second-Level Indigenisation**: Second level indigenisation differs from the post-independence ‘indigenisation’ attempts in that while the first focussed on inclusion of black people into the game or the drama, second level indigenisation questions the rules of the game, and proffers alternative or complementary plots to the drama. It engages the paradigmatic frames, the apparatus for value coding, and the constitutive (not the regulatory) rules of systems.

- **Socio-technology of humility**: This is based on the value of humanism when transposed onto science, the principle of cognitive justice and diversity, and the need for co-experimentation linking local and academic knowledges. It requests from science and technology, special attention for the process of understanding and knowledge mediation between knowledges with different epistemologies and makes specific proposals to strengthen such ethical mediation capacities.
Additional reading:

Opening address by Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers at the 5th Department of Science and Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF), South African Research Chair in Development Education retreat held at Unisa from 24 to 30 November 2012.

Address by Unisa Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mandla Makhanya, at the 5th Department of Science and Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF), South African Research Chair in Development Education retreat held at Unisa from 24 to 30 November 2012.

Some of the vital comments made by Unisa Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Professor Narend Baijnath at the 5th Department of Science and Technology (DST)/National Research Foundation (NRF), South African Research Chair in Development Education retreat held at Unisa from 24 to 30 November 2012.

Former minister of Science and Technology, Naledi Pandor, comments on the South African Research Chair in Development Education at its 4th retreat in November 2011.

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