Interview with Prof. Reitumetse Mabokela
Interview conducted by Prof. Relebohile Moletsane on 10 May 2021

Relebohile Moletsane: Could you talk about your journey in, and relationship with, higher education in South Africa, Africa and globally?

Reitumetse Mabokela: I was born and raised in Thaba Nchu in South Africa, where I completed my primary and secondary education before moving to the United States (US) on a scholarship to undertake an undergraduate degree in economics at Ohio Wesleyan. I then received a further scholarship to obtain a Masters in labour and industrial relations and then a PhD in education policy at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Subsequently, I pursued an academic career, first as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee before moving to Michigan State where I rose through the ranks to a full professor. After more than 16 years there, I returned to the University of Illinois in 2015 to assume my current position as the Vice Provost for International Affairs and Global Strategies.

Throughout this journey I have focussed quite a bit on understanding higher education policies, particularly in what I call transitional countries, such as my home country of South Africa, which went through a political transition which had a strong, direct impact on the structure of, and policies for, higher education. I spent quite a bit of time doing work in Ghana, as well as other parts of Africa, including Egypt, and then in other parts of the world such as Turkey and Pakistan.

In general, my focus has been on how education and higher education can contribute to addressing issues of access, equity and inclusion of historically marginalised groups. What that marginalisation looks like varies of course. In the case of South Africa I was interested

in issues of race, gender, class; in other parts of the world, the focus may be on gender and religion. However, gender seems to be a theme that permeates a lot of my work, because irrespective of where I am, in Africa, in the US, even in countries that seem to have long-standing traditions of gender legislation, implementation does not always seem to follow. A related focus has been the disparities experienced by women of colour.

Moletsane: Could you say a little bit about what your current position as vice provost entails?

Mabokela: I am responsible for overseeing the development of an institutional strategy for global engagement, including through efforts to support our international students and faculty staff who are here at the university, as well as outgoing students who may be interested, for example, in pursuing opportunities to study abroad or other initiatives in line with the university's global mission.

Moletsane: In your view what is or should be the purpose and role of a university?

Mabokela: The university should not only seek to pursue foundational knowledge, it also has a critical role to play in contributing to development, to engagement, to addressing in an intentional way societal problems and issues. The nature of that contribution can vary. For example, my own institution here at Illinois played a pivotal role in developing a saliva test for Covid-19 and making it widely available, not only on campus but to surrounding communities as well. Thus, the university collaborated in an intentional way with public health units, the state government and other entities to address a major global phenomenon.

And there are other ways of collaborating, such as, for example, engaging local schools or addressing major societal concerns like food security. In this regard, there are many day-to-day challenges which may be addressed through partnerships among university, private, community, government and civil society stakeholders that seek to produce multi-faceted solutions. In summary, the vision of the university as an ivory tower to which our communities do not have access is fundamentally flawed. The university should be of the people and with the people in their communities and should have impact there.

Moletsane: How relevant do you think African universities are to the continent and to their own countries – for example, in relation to current socio-economic, political and governance demands? And what makes them relevant, if they are?

Mabokela: It is important to remember how our African universities emerged. In the post-independence era, from the 1950s and the early 1960s and into the 1970s there was this surge in the development of post-colonial institutions. Many of these were modelled as elite bodies after their colonial predecessors and inherited some of the systemic disparities that came with the colonial heritage, including in relation to race, class and gender. (In the case of South Africa, these disparities were subsequently codified further under apartheid.)

At the same time, there were universities that, at the least initially at their inception, had the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to the development of African countries that were going through independence at the time, such as, for example, Makerere University in Uganda and some of the early post-colonial institutions in Tanzania, Ghana and Algeria.

But then the influence of external donors on African institutions became a major factor and that fundamentally changed the tone and tenor, and the contributions and roles of these institutions. And now, in many ways, I think we remain shackled, maybe not directly but indirectly to that legacy of post-colonial institutions which look a bit foreign on the African continent – and as a result are not addressing issues that are of relevance. In other words, African universities were conceived in one way and, although the conditions on the continent have shifted, these institutions have not shifted along with them.

For example, the higher education institutions are not responding to provide the opportunities required to accommodate the youth bulge – that is, the growth in the segment of the population aged from 15 to 35 – which is projected to take place in the next 30 to 50 years.

At the same time, a largely unregulated private higher education sector is trying to meet this demand, although in an uncoordinated way that feels quite opportunist, charging exorbitant fees to provide credentials that may in some cases may not be entirely relevant to meet the continent's development needs.

So, on one hand, African universities have a real opportunity to have some meaningful impact. But, on the other, as they are currently structured, they are not positioning themselves to make a contribution that responds to the continent's needs.

Moletsane: So, what would be your vision of the African university of the future? And what do you think stands in the way of realising that vision?

Mabokela: An African university of the future is one that provides access on an equitable basis; it should interrogate the curriculum; and it should not only address national needs but adopt a pan-African approach in pooling resources within its region to establish institutions that can leverage regional strengths and respond to regional needs.

But perhaps most important is that African universities should value their own knowledge and their own worth. So, in terms of collaboration with global partners, it is important for African institutions to show that they are not coming to the table with information, knowledge and expertise as silent partners, but are seeking to leverage their positionality and the contribution that they can make to those relationships. So that is the vision.

Then, in order to implement that vision, both the public and the private sectors should make a contribution. In this regard, the contributions from the donors should be made on the basis of a genuine partnership in support of strengthening African institutions, rather than to create dependence.

In this context, it feels almost irresponsible that African institutions are not coming together to identify in an intentional way how they are going to respond to the youth bulge. We should not be waiting for external stakeholders to figure out the solution.

Moletsane: How should African universities be responding to the issue of great unemployment on the continent and the need to support the production of entrepreneurs?

Mabokela: In order to cultivate that next generation of leaders and global problem-solvers and address the revolving-door syndrome which sees many first-year students drop out, there must be greater collaboration and engagement with partners in the primary and secondary education sectors. Then, when the students are at university in the first and second years, it is important to intervene in intentional ways in order to ensure that they do not drop out. Mentorship by academic staff, senior students and peers is absolutely vital and critical to ensure this.

In addition, in relation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, issues around funding, accommodation and security need to be addressed. These include addressing high levels of gender-based violence (GBV). There are also important social and cultural concerns that need to be addressed in support of student success. However, moving beyond the efforts that should be made to mitigate the factors that can lead to students dropping out, there is also the major challenge of high youth unemployment which is faced by many students, particularly in Africa, including South Africa. In this regard, the private sector needs to be engaged in partnerships in support of graduate employability. The universities are doing what they can to mitigate factors that impede academic success among the cohort and produce graduates who should be prospective employees, but what then?

Well, the private sector can be partnered to provide internships, externships and other opportunities that can produce employable graduates or at least offer them a pipeline along which they can transition into work. In addition, universities should be cultivating leadership and entrepreneurial skills among those students who are able to think a little bit outside the box and who could be future employers. To this end, there has to be an infrastructure that can support such students. For example, if a student has a brilliant idea for cultivating and developing a business, they may need a bank loan to help them build that enterprise.

So, in general, a multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder response and structure is required to help the youth move forward rather than a mono-directional or sole-stakeholder response.

Moletsane: What role do you see for indigenous knowledge in the kind of university that you envision, including in relation to the issue of decolonising and Africanising the curriculum?

Mabokela: One of the things that has been a real challenge across the continent, broadly speaking, has been a lack of confidence among Africans about the value of what they are bringing to the table as partners in global collaborations.

Part of the challenge here is that African pupils and students learn or acquire their entire educational experience in a second, third or fourth language, but not their mother tongue; although the research generally indicates that mother-tongue instruction is quite fundamental to producing scholarly understanding. The language issue also concerns the formation of identity. In this context, I think that the conversation about decolonising and Africanising the curriculum should start with reforming primary school education. In South Africa, for example, there are 11 official languages, but the linguistic integration or language acquisition for Black pupils and students has only taken place in one direction – that is, towards English and Afrikaans, which is a skewed approach. Instead, if the virtues of multiculturalism and multilingualism are truly valued, everyone should be learning a second language from pre-school onwards. It is also important that African experience and history becomes part of the core curriculum, rather than a mere elective subject. Making African history a core subject indicates that the society considers this topic to be of value. In the absence of such a focus, the academic experience as it is offered to international students at African universities may not look that different from the one they left behind at home. By contrast, if an international student studies in China or Japan, or the United States or Canada, the core of their academic experience will be fundamentally different from that they would have experienced in their own country. They will walk away from that experience having acquired some foundational knowledge of the host country's culture and history. At African universities though, our own children go through the entire academic experience and do not experience this kind of connection.

So, for me, the whole discourse around Africanising must start by placing our languages, culture, history and knowledge at the centre, at the core of what we impart from primary school onwards.

Moletsane: Does digital technology have a role to play in the envisioned curriculum and, if so, what should this role be?

Mabokela: Since the arrival of Covid-19 and the lockdowns that were implemented in response to the pandemic, African institutions have shown that notwithstanding the so-called digital divide between the Global North and South, they can play in the digital space – and in some cases even more innovatively than their peers in the North. For example, I remember a couple of years ago I was talking to a student who had completed an entire application for a Masters programme on a cellphone and had been accepted. So, technology has an absolutely vital role to play – but integrated in a way that harnesses African resources and responds to African conditions and challenges. And this goes back to the question of Africanising, which concerns not only how to deploy local resources, such as solar power, and how to develop and design tools, including computers, with local technology, but also how to deploy the tools that are developed effectively to meet the needs of local contexts.

For example, I recently read a study about how cellphone technology is widely used by small-scale farmers, many of whom are women, on the continent. So, in this context, an interesting question may be: How could this technology be deployed to help mitigate the

significant losses – about 40% of the harvest – which are incurred in the process of taking the food from the farm to it arriving on the consumer's plate?

Moletsane: Could you describe some of the obstacles that stand in the way of the kind of university you envisage for Africa, and how these may be overcome?

Mabokela: Governments have impeded the development of higher education on the continent, but, at the same, they have an important role to play as key partners in the future development of the sector.

In the 1980s and 1990s, partly as a result of external pressure, many African governments supported primary and secondary education at the expense of higher education, as if the budget for education was a finite pie. If one was supported, the other had to suffer. There has also been the challenge of the brain drain of African academics who start by studying abroad and then stay abroad, or if they return find that conditions in their domestic higher education sector are not entirely supportive and that their own governments even may be seeking to infringe academic freedom and suppress the expression of ideas that criticise official policies and actions.

At the same time, there is a significant opportunity for African governments to create a more supportive environment for higher education beyond just meeting their funding obligations to the sector. In particular, they should seek to ensure adherence to the policies that have been produced seeking to combat gender-based violence and discrimination. In fact, the policies are in place, for example, in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria, but the implementation is lacking, which has led to impunity. Institutions and individuals can violate; can under-represent; can remain exclusive; and can continue to marginalise, with little or no recourse for the women affected. This is an area in which governments can collaborate with universities to create an environment where the policies that have been established can be enhanced and supported, and can actually be implemented to effect change.

Another field where there is opportunity is that of international collaboration among academic institutions, which is an area in which the Mastercard Foundation has shifted the ground by promoting the primacy of African partners in such joint initiatives. I think this has helped to alter the discourse about the nature and practice of such partnerships, fostering greater recognition of the expertise, talent and energy that African institutions are bringing to the table, so that these virtues can be more effectively harnessed – and enabling greater equality and balance among the African institutions and their international peers. In this regard, making an equal contribution does not mean making the same contribution, but rather contributing what each can on the basis that the contributions are complementary. So, for example, in the field of tropical diseases as an aspect of public health studies, the opportunity to develop cures and medical interventions is much greater in Africa than elsewhere. But when African institutions enter this conversation they can tend not to enter it as contributors. They are still tentative about what they can bring to the table, notwithstanding the great advantages that they hold in relation to this field of study.

Moletsane: How do you think African universities could become a little bit more agile in terms of being responsive to social issues? Could you give an example of some of the innovative ways in which universities have responded or could respond to such issues?

Mabokela: I find myself quite frustrated at how some of our African institutions dogmatically adhere to structures, policies, procedures and curricula that are irrelevant. Sometimes, when I look at our institutions, I think that we are more colonial than the colonisers. We are still doing the same things 50 years on; and I am at a loss to explain why we are doing this, how this is supposed to be relevant. We seem to refuse to unshackle ourselves as African institutions from a curriculum that we inherited. Yet the possibility of transforming the curriculum offers a profound opportunity to be agile, to be transformative, to really cultivate that next generation of global problem-solvers in a way that is meaningful and impactful.

In addition, the intentional integration of technology to resolve the educational challenges faced by many students represents a further important area of opportunity. The deployment of appropriate technology should be an integral aspect of the day-to-day experience of an educated person graduating from an African institution.

In terms of institutional examples of what may be achieved, Ashesi University in Ghana, which is a private, non-profit body founded in 2002, provides an interesting model. The university has adopted a pan-African approach, drawing students from across the continent and offering an African-centred curriculum which aims to cultivate the next generation of leaders, providers and visionaries for the continent, rather than mere consumers. The curriculum, which is centred on the African experience, focuses on addressing African problems and providing solutions to them. And even if the graduates of Ashesi leave Ghana and study elsewhere, they will remain African-centred, that is they will engage the world from a position of strength, with a clear sense of their own identity; what they can contribute; and how they may position themselves in the future to address the fundamental problems facing the African continent.

Moletsane: Reflecting on this model, do you think that African universities have painted themselves into a corner through their adoption of neoliberal policies?

Mabokela: Such policies are a barrier because they have been shaped according to standards which we did not define and to which we did not even contribute. So, we are then playing a game according to rules that are not our own and which do not take any account of our realities. How can you win if you are constantly chasing this dream that was never yours in the first place? You are bound to lose.

Moletsane: Is there any other issue that you would like to address?

Mabokela: The issue of gender-based violence in society and at universities must be addressed. For me, this is not just an issue of women being denied access; rather it is a matter of fundamentally violent institutional cultures in which violence is manifested in

different ways towards women and girls, including women academics and students. When 50% of our population, and more than 50% of our undergraduate population in South Africa, is unsafe that is a fundamental problem. In this context, policies alone cannot be enough, we have to move beyond lip service to beautiful policies, of which there is no shortage, to holding institutions, sectors and governments to account. Right now, nobody is being held to account. A future African university which is genuinely inclusive must ensure everyone's safety and not undermine any students or staff by virtue of the fact that we are women.