IS THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY CONDEMNED TO CHASE AN EVER-CHANGING JOB MARKET?

Sidy Danioko

Today, across Africa, one argument seems to command universal agreement: university curricula should be adapted to the needs of the job market. Yet this ambition, legitimate as it may be, calls for careful reflection on its long-term implications and on the true mission of the university in our societies.

Yesterday, the priority was to train more computer scientists. Today, attention is turning to artificial intelligence, data science and cybersecurity. Tomorrow, new scientific and technological advances could profoundly transform these fields and render obsolete some of the skills currently in high demand.

Must we then rebuild our university curricula with every new wave of technology? Must we continually sacrifice foundational knowledge on the altar of immediate employability?

And above all, which job market are we talking about? The one that exists today, or the one we want and need to build tomorrow?

These questions invite us to look beyond the alignment of education and employment alone, and to reflect on the place of education in the development of our societies.

Employability: a legitimate requirement, but not enough

It would be difficult to dispute the need to prepare students for working life. A university education that entirely ignored economic realities and its graduates' prospects of entering the workforce would fall short of part of its mission.

Yet reducing the university to a mere provider of skills designed to meet the immediate needs of businesses would be a mistake.

The university must also produce knowledge, develop critical thinking, train researchers, encourage creativity and prepare future generations for realities we do not yet know.

A society does not progress solely because it has workers capable of carrying out the tasks required of them. It also progresses through women and men who can question existing methods, imagine new solutions and open up previously unexplored possibilities.

Employability is therefore an important objective of higher education, but it cannot be its sole purpose.

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The trap of perpetual adaptation

Contemporary technological transformations illustrate this difficulty perfectly.

Tools evolve, occupations change and certain skills become less sought after. Yet foundational knowledge, scientific methods and the capacity to reason retain their importance, even as their applications change.

Mathematics, physics, logic, scientific rigour and analytical thinking remain essential foundations of innovation.

Training students exclusively to use the technologies of the moment could therefore leave our universities endlessly chasing transformations over which they have no control.

By contrast, educating students who can understand scientific principles, develop technologies and design new applications would give them greater means to participate in these transformations.

This is not about setting foundational knowledge against practical skills. Both are necessary and must reinforce one another.

The real challenge is to strike a balance between preparing students for today's professional demands and developing the intellectual capacities that will enable them to meet future challenges.

And what of those who never reach university?

This reflection on higher education must not, however, cause us to overlook a fundamental reality: not all young Africans gain access to university.

Some leave school for economic or social reasons. Others enter working life, crafts, farming or trade without pursuing higher education.

What does our education system offer them?

Serious reform of African education cannot be confined to the university. It must also address the quality of primary and secondary education, technical and vocational training, apprenticeships, and opportunities for lifelong learning.

Our societies need researchers, doctors, engineers and academics. But they have just as much need of skilled technicians, innovative farmers, capable craftspeople, entrepreneurs and professionals who can contribute to the development of their communities.

A person's worth and the value of their contribution to society cannot be measured solely by a university degree.

It is therefore essential to create educational pathways that are diverse, accessible and sufficiently robust to enable everyone to develop their abilities.

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The aim is not to steer every young person towards university as a matter of course, but to ensure that those who do not attend also have real opportunities to learn, gain qualifications and flourish.

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What kind of society should the African university serve?

Another question deserves our attention: are our universities doing enough to address the fundamental needs of our societies?

Africa faces numerous challenges in agriculture, energy, health, industrialisation, infrastructure, governance and economic transformation.

To what extent does the knowledge produced by our universities help us better understand these problems and develop appropriate responses?

Should our higher education institutions be content to educate graduates for entry into existing economic structures, or should they also help create new activities, new industries and new employment opportunities?

This question is particularly important in a context where global technological transformations are largely driven by research centres, businesses and institutions located outside the continent.

Africa cannot remain content indefinitely with a position in which it adopts innovations devised elsewhere without sufficiently developing its own capacities for research, design and production.

This does not mean rejecting knowledge, technologies or experiences from other parts of the world.

On the contrary, intellectual openness and scientific cooperation are indispensable.

But this openness must go hand in hand with a capacity for discernment, adaptation and creation.

Our universities should be places where knowledge from elsewhere meets African realities to produce new responses suited to our needs and ambitions.

Preparing for today's job market or building tomorrow's?

At heart, the central question remains how we relate to the future.

If our universities limit themselves to adapting their programmes to the jobs available today, they risk preparing young people for an economic environment whose opportunities remain inadequate.

If, on the other hand, they help advance research, innovation, productive capacities and entrepreneurship, they can play a part in transforming that environment.

Africa does not only need graduates capable of entering the job market. It also needs graduates capable of contributing to its transformation.

It needs people who do more than use existing technologies: people who can also understand, adapt and improve them and, wherever possible, devise new ones.

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This ambition requires universities with high standards, educators supported in their work, strong research institutions and education policies grounded in a long-term vision of development.

It also requires that education be seen not merely as a response to unemployment, but as one of the foundations of a society's capacity to think about and build its future.

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Thinking about our own future

Africa has much to learn from the experiences of the rest of the world. But learning does not mean copying as a matter of course.

We must avoid treating every external model, every new technology or every international policy direction as a solution that need only be adopted without critical examination.

Our economic, social, cultural and institutional realities require independent reflection on the choices we make.

This responsibility applies especially to education.

A university that merely followed transformations decided elsewhere would risk remaining in a perpetual state of adaptation.

A university capable of producing knowledge, developing critical thinking and contributing to innovation could, by contrast, become a key agent of Africa's transformation.

The issue, then, is not to choose between the demands of the job market and the university's intellectual mission. It is to understand that the latter must enable us to meet the former without submitting to them entirely.

For our true ambition should be not merely to educate graduates suited to today's job market, but to educate generations capable of helping to build tomorrow's.

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