

Panel Discussion: The Interconnection between the Academic World and Social Reality

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The panel discussion aimed to reflect on the interconnection between the academic world and the social reality in African countries. By discussing the introductory question “Is academia an extension of privilege?” posed by the moderator Stella Asimwe (Weltmuseum), the panelists **Fatima-Zohra Iflahen** (Full Professor and Vice-President in charge of Research, Cooperation & Partnerships at Cadi Ayyad University, Morocco), **Abdulkarim Sabo Mohammed** (PhD holder in finance and lecturer at the Department of Banking and Finance at the Federal University Dutse, Nigeria), **Carol Nonkwelo** (Senior Director for Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Education at the University of Pretoria, South Africa), **Retselisitsoe Thamae** (Senior Lecturer in Economics and member of the Energy Research Centre and the Innovations Committee at the National University of Lesotho) and **Martin Woller** (Regional Director Africa & Middle East at the ADVANTAGE AUSTRIA head office in Vienna, formerly Head of ADVANTAGE AUSTRIA Egypt and Libya, Deputy Head of ADVANTAGE AUSTRIA in Nigeria and China) brought a wide variety of perspectives to the stage and showed ways in which the social relevance of universities in African contexts can be increased.

Fatima-Zohra Iflahen underlined how science and research are on the one hand serving the public by working on educating the masses, yet on the other hand remain elitist as *including* the masses is not always given and even public universities show differences regarding access and quality. She explained: “Universities are in heart of society, so they are also in heart of power relations”. Universities still reenact classes of society, patriarchy and invisibility – they are socializing institutions that express *elitism*, exclusion, inequality, and power dynamics. By shifting the focus of academia to the question of how to produce knowledge that is meaningful in a way that it transforms lives, she suggests, researchers can reclaim to be actors that serve society. As the decisions of which research is being done (and which isn’t) is important, science needs to evaluate and consider the *needs of the people*, what’s working for them and *include* their suggestions into research. For that, Iflahen stressed the “need to listen – actively listen and HEAR. Only then, education, research and work can be directed towards the needs of society” and build the pillars of basic education and lifelong learning.

Abdulkarim Sabo Mohammed expressed great agreement with Iflahen and added that academia is often *disconnected* from societal reality: Youth is trained to become elites, to obtain certificates, even though the actual mandate of academia and research is community service.

In South-East Asia, where he had been a researcher for multiple years, he explains, research gets directly implemented and is being used in economy and society – it’s connected. In Africa, academia is often disconnected: research gets published, but not implemented. It is currently not trickling down. Therefore, he calls for more training and implementation than academia only. Knowledge needs to be translated into tangible products to be brought to the community. At the same time there are talents in the community that the university is missing. If the universities’ output is only publishing, a lot of people don’t have access to that. This is the reason why the community needs to be brought to academia.

Carol Nonkwelo explained that in South Africa universities have evolved, but not enough: 70% are Youth and younger than 30 years old, yet unemployment is the highest in the world. How

come? The questions to ask are: 1) What are we (as academics and researchers) good at? 2) What are we good for? **Nonkwelo** remarked that researchers have become shy; they are discussing less in public. He calls for them to come back and “bring back a sense of boldness, that academics actually have.”

Retselisitsoe Thamae indicated that Africa has been focusing more on creating job seekers than job creators – but job creation is important, which is why this should be a mandate for universities. He pointed out that governments tend to reduce subventions to universities, which leads to tough conditions for students to study in poor countries. To improve the situation, *Education 5.0* is needed, an approach that doesn't include only teaching, research and community service, but also innovation and commercialization. But how is this to be achieved? How to address societal issues? Thamae's answer is *creating structures* and he presents examples at his university on how to connect academia with communities and industry: The Innovation Hub that supports over 400 start-up businesses from students and the Energy Research Centre that promotes energy access were created. Both are, he explained, addressing real societal problems. Like **Nonkwelo** he highlighted the need for researchers to also engage in information dissemination. His university, for example, created a Facebook page, posting every day about what they're working at in order to change their image and inform the public.

Martin Woller explained that his organization promotes partnerships with Austrian companies, also to support African companies. He has a general interest in working together with universities, especially in the nexus of water and energy. “It's about understanding, relations, connections”, Woller explains. “Having connections to another country through exchange programmes like Africa-UniNet is extremely helpful.” There is a need for talent in companies and industry – they are the base of success of a country –, but talents also need to be practically trained, too, which is why cooperation between industry and research is essential. In every company, but also for the society and the country.

Discussion and food for thought

The statements of the five speakers are followed by the Q and A. From young scientists to experienced project co-workers there are a lot of different statements and questions from the audience, contributing to an atmosphere of an advancing and fruitful discussion.

Special consideration is given to the problems of young populations and missing job opportunities as well as the interconnection between universities and economic solutions. The wish for research that is solving economic problems and is implementing its findings in actual areas of society is expressed. The disconnection of academic success and social action is addressed, along with the proposition to combine implementations of findings with their publication. Another question concerns the political sphere, and how to get decision-makers interested in research.

The panel answers with slightly different approaches. **Fatima-Zohra Iflahen** makes a strong statement about the involvement of the people gathered in this general assembly and their work for research outside ‘ivory towers’. She further advocates the importance and key role of knowledge, which lies in building strong democracies and giving people the opportunity to choose their politicians. **Retselisitsoe Thamae** underlines this argument with the bottom-up approaches used in their projects and the necessity of pressure coming from informed communities to change given structures. **Carol Nonkwelo** agrees on the statements made

about entrepreneurship programmes and their partnerships with universities but draws attention to the fact that it is not a question of either/or but that the functions of universities are multiple, including publishing and teaching. **Fatima-Zohra Iflahen** affirms this thought in questioning whether it is the role of universities to produce people for the job market or rather to produce citizens.

The importance of a broad educational system is reaffirmed by the speakers, and the message of the positive role universities can play to change paradigms is a key message to take home.