Enhancing Skills Based Education and Training for Sustainable Economic Development

Graduation Speech | Kenya Methodist University | 5 November 2022

1. Chancellor, Kenya Methodist University
2. BoT & Council Members, Kenya Methodist University
3. All distinguished Guests
4. Members of the University Senate,
5. Members of Staff, Graduating Class, Parents and Guardians
6. Ladies and Gentlemen

I bring you greetings from the Directors, Staff and Students of Wesley House Cambridge where I am Principal, and from the Methodist Church in Britain with whom KeMU and Wesley House are in partnership together.

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be here with you on this day of celebration with those of you who have graduated, with your families and friends who have supported you and with the teaching and administrative staff of the university whose work, both seen and unseen, makes possible the student success that we mark today. I congratulate you all.

A graduation ceremony presents an opportunity to reflect in two ways. First about the purpose of a university amid the opportunities and challenges of its context; and second about the challenges and opportunities before its graduates as you embark on the next phase of your lives.

The theme for today chosen by the university is: ***"Enhancing Skills Based Education and Training for Sustainable Economic Development".*** It is an important theme that relates both to the work of a university and to those of you graduating today.

Let me say first of all though, that I am not an economist. I am a theologian. This does not mean, however, that I am not interested in skills-based education nor in sustainable economic development. I have worked most of my adult life in training leaders and as such I have been concerned with three aspects of learning: the character or dispositions of those who will lead; the knowledge needed by those we prepare for work; and the skills needed by those who will soon be practitioners. I care too about sustainable development because I care about the flourishing of the whole inhabited earth

which I believe that God weaves together for good with those who love him, (Romans 8.28).
First, let me talk about skills based education and training. Increasingly it is recognised by those engaged in forming clergy in the circles in which I move that the skill set we have relied upon in the past is no longer sufficient for leadership in today's church and world. Not only do students need to be able to preach the doctrines of the church; not only do they need the pastoral skills to meet people where they are and help them cope with the emotional and spiritual challenges of life; they need skills of innovation to be able to interpret a changing context and re-interpret the unchanging message of the gospel in a changing world, creating new forms of church and service that are faithful to values rooted in the love of God and neighbour yet which are fit for purpose in a fast changing world.

The world is changing nowhere faster than on the continent of Africa. According to weforum.org more than 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25 and by 2030 young Africans are expected to constitute 42% of global youth. Africa is a young continent with huge potential to shape the future of the world and yet it continues to face some of the most difficult challenges on the planet: endemic poverty; corruption in public office; and the impact of climate change on food security. These mutually reinforcing problems make a focus upon sustainable development a high priority for the universities of Africa who need to work hand in hand with public and private sectors, policy makers and investors to build an environment in which sustainable economic development is possible.

South African education and development experts, Simon McGrath and Lesley Powell, argue in an article published in 2015 that, "Skills development can only play a small role within the wider systemic and cultural transformations that are necessary for sustainable development to be achieved," but they say, "that role is not insignificant given the crucial place that skills are allocated both in articulating between education and active citizenship, and between schooling and work." (McGrath & Powell 2015: 2).

It is here precisely that many of you sit today, poised between education and active citizenship and between schooling and work and I wonder what skills you feel you have developed for citizenship and work during your time at KeMU, and what skills you will need to develop as life unfolds?

In my field of ministry formation, in 2019 the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church published research in which they identified agility as one of the key skill sets needed today. Likewise, in the field of engineering, Brazilian engineering lecturer, Filippe Muñoz-La Rivera focuses on the need for innovation skills in an article published in 2020. In the relevant literature about training engineers they identified 20 characteristics which they organised into 4 areas: technical or practical characteristics like adaptability; troubleshooting and experimenting; interpersonal and social characteristics like passion, responsibility and collaboration; powers of reasoning including proactivity and challenging established ways of thinking; and management or business skills like being user-focused and implementation focused.

So it seems that today skills in agility and innovation are needed across a wide range of fields of work. I wonder how agile and innovative you are feeling as you embark on your chosen professions? Whether we are health professionals, journalists, teachers, counsellors, computer scientists, politicians, leaders in business or religious life or in the education sector we need to be both giraffes and gazelles. We need, like giraffes to see far and to plan into the future for ourselves and for others, but we also need to be light on our feet and able to move and change direction like gazelles to meet the challenges and obstacles that will get in our way.

Muñoz-La Rivera et al argued though, that in order to design training and education that produces engineers who are genuinely innovative an even more radical move is needed than a focus on innovation; they want universities to ask questions about what engineering (and other) courses are for. Are university courses in such subjects only about producing engineers, health workers, scientists, teachers and leaders who can get good jobs and earn money for themselves and kudos for their universities, making other students want to study there? Or is there a deeper purpose?

For Muñoz et al, the deeper purpose is expressed in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. They argue that trainee engineers not only need the characteristics of innovators at the level of knowing and knowing how to be; rather in order to know how to do they also need to know what the doing is for. This means, they suggest, that skills for innovation need to be couched not only in terms of any relevant industry or professional standards, but in terms of its social purposes.

So, they argue, for example, an adaptable engineer will be able to analyze situations of the environment, apply strategies to create or improve products and services, face changes with flexibility *and* constructively promote the sustainable growth of society. This is what the adaptability is for; further, a creative engineer will design alternative solutions to systems and processes finding learning opportunities in the problems and generating new ideas *that allow response to future demands of the environment and that promote an efficient and sustainable use of ecosystems*. Built into the skills needed by trainee engineers they argue are clear statements about the ethical ends to which such skills will be put, summarised as the sustainable development of society.

In the approach of Muñoz-La Rivera et al I see two challenges for Kenya Methodist University and for all our universities. First, the challenge, that is already being taken up – evidenced in the first graduates of your TVET course, is to move towards a model of education that rewards the higher skills on Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives – this means moving away from what the Kenyan Anglican scholar, Jessie Mugambi calls African schooling based on memorisation, that rewards those who can pass exams and who may immediately forget what they crammed into their brains. (Mugambi 2009).

Instead, Mugambi recommends a move towards a more critical and creative kind of education that values and assesses students' abilities to analyse practical situations and to create solutions in collaboration with others in real settings. This he argues is a more authentically African way of educating that sees the purpose of education as being directed not towards abstract knowledge for its own sake, nor for individual gain, but for the purpose of life lived to the full for the benefit of the whole community. Such a move not only requires new teaching methods and new teaching settings but also new assessment strategies and collaboration across universities, industry, professional associations and quality assurance bodies to create benchmarks that are not only knowledge based but integrate skills and dispositions in use. A medical training that results in professional recognition in the hospitals where they serve is a good example of this and KeMU is to be congratulated on being the first private university to achieve this.

The second challenge for KeMU and all our universities is to root the description of the skills that we are wanting to develop in students in whatever subjects from medicine to agriculture, from ICT to theology, in the UN's sustainable development goals in ways that clearly embed explicit ethical values into professional practice.

One of the dubious legacies of colonization and the Enlightenment tradition of education that came with it is a myth that education is or can be somehow value neutral. The impact of the processes of industrialisation, and then technicalisation and bureaucratisation that come with globalization though, make it clear that an education that does not reflect on its values, will value profit above people; the immediate over the intergenerational; and tip the balance of the world's wealth and health ever more towards those who already have advantage. Such education is not value neutral but is value loaded and these are values that need challenging and replacing. As a Methodist-Related Higher Education Institution KeMU is well placed to do some ground breaking work in integrating ethical values into all its curricula though a systematic engagement with these development goals in the way modelled by Muñoz et al in the field of engineering because Methodist views of salvation, from John Wesley onwards have always been concerned not only with personal salvation and the world to come, but with the wellbeing and flourishing of the whole person and the whole society and with the inhabitation by God's holy spirit of the world that is experienced as peace, joy and happiness in community in the here and now.

Like Muñoz et al, McGrath and Powell also argue that the 17 sustainable development goals are important but they raise questions about the way in which Vocational and Educational Training (VET) is approached as a possible solution. First they point out that sustainable development is a difficult term that means many things to many people. For some it is economic sustainability that is the priority in order to create wealth, eradicate poverty and support social inclusion; for others it is the sustainability of the planet that needs to come first even if it costs jobs. Often these two interpretations are in tension – is there a way they ask to hold these two goods together or must one always be at the expense of the other?

Second, McGrath and Powell critique the traditional ways in which vocational education and training perpetuate myths that they believe need examination. First, VET has been characterised as being locked "into a blinkered race for 'global economic competitiveness' which ignores the ecological costs of training for a growth-oriented industrial system (McGrath and Powell: 6)". Second, they cite Anderson's 2009 complaint that there seems to be no questioning of an old faith in "a virtuous circle between skill formation, industrial productivity and economic growth, leading to increased employment opportunities and individual earnings" (Anderson 2008: 115).

In fact, in Africa where youth unemployment is high and getting higher – including in Kenya - there is serious doubt as to whether an unlimited growth based approach to VET is viable. By contrast McGrath and Powell argue that VET needs a "reimagined purpose that is grounded in a view of work, and hence skills for work, that is decent, life-enhancing, solidaristic, gender-aware, environmentally-sensitive and intergenerationally-minded (McGrath and Powell: 11)." In other words they want to move the paradigm from an unquestioningly market driven goal of limitless growth, towards a vision of human and environmental sustainability that radically critiques the structural inequalities that much existing VET props up. In particular, they want an approach to VET that prioritises the impact of the training and education that is offered on the poorest and those most vulnerable in our societies, focusing on micro businesses and community based initiatives that build local environmental and economic resilience. An example of this kind of work is going on at the Methodist Biodiversity Centre just next door. Here, instead of relying on expensive and imported technologies, farmers are taught locally sustainable techniques for maximising productivity while at the same time caring for the environment on which we all rely.

So here is a third challenge for Kenya Methodist University (and for us all) – to ensure that the skills based training we offer gives students the opportunity not just to succeed within a given system, but to critique and evaluate the goals of the systems themselves, equipping them and helping them to become leaders and bosses, educators and policy makers who seek to equip people for decent work that is life enhancing, environmentally sensitive and inter-generationally minded, based not in unsustainable models of limitless growth, but in models of sustainable development at the micro, mid and macro levels.

At the outset of my speech I promised that this theme would address both the university and those graduating today. Some of what I wanted to say to those of you who are graduating is already available to you in my message in the graduation booklet that you have in front of you: to set your course in terms of the kind of difference you want to make in the world, using the values that KeMU has helped to instil in you as your compass.

What I want to say to you specifically in relation to today's theme is this. You are living in challenging times. The world you inherit is not the world as it should be. But, whether you are graduating in health sciences, education and social sciences, science and technology, business or theology you have an opportunity now, not just to succeed in a system that will reward you with money and status, but much more importantly, you have an opportunity to challenge and change systems to create a more sustainable, humane and resilient world for everyone.

Obiageli K Ezekwesili, then Vice President of the World Bank, addressing the University of Nairobi in November 2009 said to her audience, "The biggest change that you need to make is in your mindset; shifting from that of job seekers to job creators; from writing good bios to writing great business plans. It also means transitioning from being provincial to thinking regionally and yes, even globally; from waiting for change to becoming the drivers of change." (Ezekwesili 2009)

And the changes that are needed need to come from all sectors. According to the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge (Bennett Institute 2019) we need to engage *all* kinds of capital and not just focus on GDP as a measure of wealth. Rather wealth creation needs to engage: natural capital – ecosystems, raw materials and a stable climate; human capital – which means the health and skills of the population; knowledge capital – which includes best practices and learning by trial and experiment; physical capital which includes infrastructure like roads and communications; social capital which refers to interpersonal trust, shared norms and community cohesiveness and provides the glue that enables communities to work together to solve problems, and institutional capital that involves the quality and reliability of governance both within and between institutions.

And this means that there is a role in wealth creation for sustainable development for everyone graduating here today, whatever your subject specialisms.

If you are going to be a policy maker then work to create a climate that will encourage investors to make long term commitments, even across election cycles. Look for investment that will improve human skills but also the basic infrastructures of health and education, transport and power supplies that people need to innovate and thrive but do it in ways that do not undermine environmental stability.

If you are going to be a leader in business or in local government, or an employer or a boss of any kind, communicate clearly in word and deed that that public probity will be rewarded and that misuse of office will be punished. In Kenya, as much as 20% of the value of sales is lost due to crime, insecurity, and bribes. Refuse the short cuts of sexism, nepotism and tribalism and the prosperity gospel, and work instead for a fairer, more stable, more inclusive and more resilient society for everyone so that human capital and social capital are not wasted.

If you are going to be a religious leader or a health worker or a journalist, think about the ways in which your expertise and positions of responsibility can contribute to the building up of social capital and of responsible institutional governance that create the conditions of stability and trust on which so much sustainable development relies.

And whatever your field, resolve to be an innovator, an educator and a collaborator with others: don't just perpetuate what you find; think about the knowledge and skills that are needed for the future, but think too about the values that will help to underpin sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity. Think about what promotes the flourishing of the whole community and who you can mentor, apprentice or teach to join you on the road that leads to life. Follow the example of the Anna Qabale Duba whom we congratulate today on the global award she has won for her services to nursing amongst pastoralist communities.

I said at the start of this address that I am not an economist, I am a theologian even though what I have talked about today concerns skills based education for sustainable development. Theology, though, for me, is not a silo subject; rather it lives and breathes and fulfils its purpose when it is engaging with real life questions and real life situations and when, like other subjects, it can answer the question of what it is for.

For me, theology is for the sake of human flourishing; a view that I ground in the words of Jesus in the gospel of John: 'I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly'.

My prayer for you all today is a share in that abundance - not as a private possession – but as a full participation in the labouring of the whole creation towards its fulfilment. May God bless you all.

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