OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

REIMAGINING PEDAGOGY FOR A CHANGING WORLD: THE PURPOSE, PRACTICE AND PROMISE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

ADDRESS BY:

PROFESSOR NANA ABA APPIAH AMFO

VICE-CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2026
6TH UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS INT'L WEEK
UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS, NIGERIA

Protocol and Introduction

The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos, Professor Folasade Ogunsola,

Members of the University Management,

Distinguished scholars and colleagues,

Students, invited guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

It is a pleasure to be here at the University of Lagos for your 6th International Week. I thank my colleague and friend, Professor Folasade Ogunsola, and the University community for the invitation and for the opportunity to reflect with you on a subject that goes to the very heart of our work as universities.

Our theme, *"Re-imagining Pedagogy and Teaching for Higher Education in the 21st Century,"* is timely and demanding.

I would like to begin with a question.

If we were designing the university for the first time today, would we design it exactly as it is? Would we organise knowledge into the same disciplinary compartments? Would we teach in the same ways? Would we assess students primarily through the same examinations? Would we still expect students to spend years acquiring knowledge that is increasingly available at the touch of a button? And perhaps most importantly, would we define educational success in quite the same way?

These are uncomfortable questions, particularly for those of us who have spent our professional lives in universities. But they are questions we can no longer avoid.

We live in a world in which artificial intelligence is changing how knowledge is produced and used. Climate change, public health threats, migration, demographic change and geopolitical uncertainty are reshaping our societies. Professional fields are evolving, sometimes

faster than universities can revise their curricula.

Meanwhile, African universities are expected to respond to these transformations while addressing longstanding developmental challenges, widening participation and managing significant resource constraints.

Against this background, I want to argue that the starting point for reimagining pedagogy is not technology. It is purpose.

Before asking how we should teach, we must ask: *What is higher education for in the 21st century? What should it enable our graduates to become? And what responsibilities do universities have to the societies that sustain them?*

I will explore these questions from the perspective of an African academic and university leader, drawing on experiences at the University of Ghana, developments elsewhere on our continent, and lessons from the wider higher education community.

1. Rethinking the Value of Higher Education

For generations, higher education has been associated with opportunity.

A university degree has represented access to professional employment, social mobility, intellectual development and, in many African societies, the fulfilment of aspirations extending well beyond the individual graduate.

Many of us know families who have made enormous sacrifices to put one child through university, believing that the education of that child could transform the prospects of an entire household.

That belief remains powerful. And it remains legitimate. But the relationship between a university qualification and a secure professional future is no longer as straightforward as it once appeared.

Graduates increasingly enter uncertain labour markets. Some professions are being transformed by automation. New occupations are emerging, while others are disappearing or changing fundamentally.

If our understanding of the value of higher education rests only on preparing students for particular jobs, we risk preparing them for a world

that may no longer exist by the time they graduate.

Does that mean employability is unimportant? Certainly not. Universities must take seriously the responsibility to equip students with knowledge and capabilities that enable them to earn livelihoods, pursue fulfilling careers and contribute productively to their economies. But employability is necessary; it is not sufficient.

Higher education must also cultivate intellectual independence, ethical judgement, creativity, cultural understanding, adaptability and a commitment to the public good.

A university graduate should be able to interrogate information rather than simply consume it; recognise a problem, investigate its causes and develop possible solutions; work with people whose perspectives differ from their own; and continue learning long after formal education has ended.

For African universities, there is an additional responsibility. Our institutions must help produce the knowledge, leadership and

capabilities needed to address the continent's challenges, from health systems and food security to environmental sustainability, inequality, democratic governance and technological inclusion.

This does not mean that African higher education should be narrowly utilitarian or concerned only with immediate development problems.

The humanities, the arts, fundamental science and theoretical inquiry remain indispensable. They expand the boundaries of knowledge, preserve and interrogate our histories, deepen our understanding of human experience, and help societies ask questions they may not yet know how to answer.

Indeed, at a time when technology can generate answers with remarkable speed, the capacity to ask good questions may be more valuable than ever. The 21st-century university must therefore do more than certify what students know. It must develop their capacity to think, to learn, to act and to contribute. And that understanding of educational value must shape our pedagogy.

2. From Teaching as Transmission to Learning as Transformation

Many of us were educated within a familiar pedagogical tradition. The lecturer possessed knowledge. The student came to receive it. The lecture was the principal means of transmission, and examinations established how much of that knowledge the student could reproduce.

This approach has produced generations of excellent scholars and professionals. I would not dismiss it. There is still an important place for a well-delivered lecture, for disciplined reading, for mastering foundational concepts and for learning from someone with deep expertise.

But we must acknowledge its limitations. Students can listen attentively, take excellent notes, pass examinations and still struggle to apply their knowledge to unfamiliar situations.

The question is not whether lecturers should continue to teach. Of course we should. The question is whether teaching should be judged principally by what the lecturer delivers or by what the student is

enabled to learn and do.

That distinction is fundamental. Consider a public health student learning about disease prevention. It is important to understand epidemiological concepts, health systems and the social determinants of health. But what happens when that student encounters a community in which sound public health advice is resisted because it conflicts with local beliefs, economic realities or experiences of public institutions?

The student needs more than technical knowledge. They need communication skills, cultural sensitivity, ethical judgement and the capacity to work with communities.

Or consider an engineering student who can solve a technical problem on paper but has never had to design a solution within the financial, environmental and infrastructural constraints of a particular African community.

Or a linguistics student who understands theories of language variation but has never examined how language differences influence access to

education, justice, healthcare or emerging technologies. These are not arguments against disciplinary knowledge. They are arguments for helping students connect knowledge with context.

Across higher education, approaches such as problem-based learning, case studies, simulations, collaborative projects, fieldwork, community-engaged learning and research-led teaching are helping to make that connection.

Their common feature is that students are not simply recipients of information. They become active participants in constructing, testing and applying knowledge.

At the University of Ghana, this thinking underpins our commitment to a Transformative Student Experience, the first priority of our 2024–2029 Strategic Plan.

We want students to encounter a university experience that develops them intellectually, professionally, socially and personally. That means paying attention not only to what is taught, but also to how students

engage with knowledge, with one another, with their lecturers and with the wider world.

Our Student Venture Support Programme, for example, seeks to support students in developing entrepreneurial ideas and translating them into viable initiatives. The value of such a programme extends beyond the businesses that may eventually emerge. Students learn to identify problems, test assumptions, communicate ideas, respond to criticism, collaborate and manage uncertainty. These are educational outcomes in their own right.

We have also supported innovation challenges that bring together students and researchers across disciplines. One example is the Tɛkyerɛma Pa initiative, which explores how artificial intelligence and speech-recognition technologies can help reduce communication barriers for persons with speech impairments, while taking Ghanaian languages seriously. This is not simply a computer science problem. It requires linguistic knowledge, technological expertise, an understanding of disability and meaningful engagement with the people for whom the

solutions are intended.

It demonstrates why some of the most valuable learning happens when disciplinary knowledge encounters a real human problem.

We should not simply ask whether our students have mastered what we taught them. We should ask what they can now do, understand or question that they could not before.

3. The Graduate We Want: Curriculum Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

If the purpose of higher education is changing, then the curriculum must also evolve.

For a long time, universities have organised learning principally around disciplines. There are good reasons for this. Disciplines provide conceptual frameworks, methods of inquiry and standards of evidence.

But the problems confronting contemporary societies do not arrive neatly labelled as economics, engineering, medicine, linguistics or

political science.

Consider climate change. It is a scientific problem, certainly. But it is also an economic, political, cultural, ethical and communication problem.

Or consider public health. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that managing a health emergency requires biomedical expertise, but also trust, communication, governance, social understanding, logistics and ethical decision-making.

We need graduates with disciplinary depth, but also the capacity to recognise connections across fields. At the University of Ghana, our ongoing review of the University Required Courses reflects this thinking.

We are introducing compulsory learning in Digital Literacy and Applied Artificial Intelligence, alongside a proposed module in Gender, Equality, Disability and Inclusion.

I consider this combination particularly important.

It says that every graduate, regardless of discipline, should understand the technologies reshaping contemporary life. But it also says that technological competence alone is not enough. Graduates must understand the societies in which technologies operate, the inequalities they may reproduce, and the responsibilities involved in developing and using them.

An engineer should be able to consider the social consequences of a design. A business graduate should understand the ethical and inclusion implications of organisational decisions. A scientist should be able to communicate evidence to diverse publics.

And a humanities graduate should be sufficiently digitally literate to engage critically with the technologies transforming knowledge and society. These are not competing priorities. They are complementary dimensions of a rounded education.

There is a further question we must confront: whose knowledge enters our classrooms?

African universities have long participated in intellectual traditions in which knowledge produced elsewhere has often been privileged over locally grounded scholarship and experience. International knowledge is indispensable, and scholarship must remain open to ideas from everywhere.

But our curricula should also engage seriously with African intellectual traditions, languages, histories, experiences and contemporary realities.

Decolonising education should not mean rejecting knowledge because of its geographical origins. It should mean critically examining whose perspectives have been privileged, whose contributions have been overlooked, and how our students can encounter a fuller range of intellectual resources. The goal is not intellectual isolation. It is intellectual confidence: producing graduates who can engage with the world while remaining grounded in the societies from which they come.

4. Inclusive Pedagogy: Who Is Our University Designed to Teach?

Colleagues, I want to turn to a question that is sometimes treated as

peripheral to pedagogy, when it should be central.

Who is able to participate fully in the learning experience we provide?

When we speak of student-centred teaching, which students do we have in mind? The student who can afford a laptop and reliable internet connectivity? The student who learns most easily through conventional lectures and written examinations? The student who can move freely between classrooms, libraries and laboratories?

Or do we also have in mind students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, students whose first language differs from the language of instruction, and students whose circumstances make conventional participation difficult? Inclusion is not achieved simply by opening the university's gates.

Access gets students into the university. Inclusion determines whether they can participate, belong and succeed once they arrive.

At the University of Ghana, our Centre for Disability Studies and Advocacy (CEDSA) plays an important role in advancing disability

inclusion and supporting efforts to make the University environment more responsive to the needs of persons with disabilities.

Its work reminds us that inclusion requires more than goodwill. It requires institutional attention, advocacy, support systems and a willingness to identify and remove barriers.

A student may have the intellectual ability to excel but encounter difficulties because learning materials are inaccessible, teaching methods are inflexible, assessment arrangements do not adequately accommodate disability, or the physical environment limits participation. These are not necessarily deficits in the student. They may be deficits in how we have designed the learning environment.

This is why I believe that inclusive pedagogy must be understood as an institutional responsibility rather than an individual lecturer's act of kindness.

It requires accessible learning materials, thoughtful assessment practices, appropriate accommodations, supportive technologies, informed faculty

and an institutional culture in which students feel able to seek assistance without stigma. It also requires us to listen to students themselves. We should not presume to know what inclusion means for people whose experiences differ from our own.

I see a direct connection here with the broader principle of universal design for learning: where possible, we should design learning experiences from the outset to accommodate diverse ways of accessing information, engaging with material and demonstrating understanding.

This benefits more than students with formally recognised disabilities.

Flexible learning approaches can also support students with different learning needs, language backgrounds and personal circumstances. Inclusion has a digital dimension too.

During periods of disruption, universities have discovered that sophisticated online platforms are of limited value if students cannot afford the data or devices required to access them. At UG, we have explored low-bandwidth approaches, including the use of familiar

communication platforms such as Telegram and asynchronous learning arrangements. We have also pursued initiatives to improve students' access to digital devices, such as our one-student one-laptop programme.

These experiences reinforce an important lesson: pedagogical innovation is not necessarily about adopting the most sophisticated technology. Sometimes it is about finding the most appropriate solution for the students you actually have.

Across Africa, where institutions operate within widely differing infrastructural and socioeconomic circumstances, this principle is especially important.

We must resist the temptation to measure educational innovation solely by the sophistication of the equipment we purchase. The more important question is whether our choices expand meaningful learning opportunities. And as we reimagine higher education, we must remember that an excellent university is not simply one in which the most advantaged students thrive. It is one that deliberately creates

conditions in which students with diverse circumstances and abilities have a fair opportunity to realise their potential.

5. Artificial Intelligence and the Human Purpose of Education

No serious discussion of pedagogy in the 21st century can avoid artificial intelligence.

AI is already changing how students search for information, draft assignments, analyse data, translate languages, write code and engage with learning materials.

It is also changing how lecturers prepare teaching resources, design learning activities and conduct research. The temptation is to respond in one of two ways.

One is to celebrate AI uncritically as the solution to our educational challenges. The other is to regard it primarily as a threat to academic integrity and attempt to prohibit its use. Neither response is sufficient.

The real challenge is to ask how AI can strengthen learning without

weakening the intellectual capabilities that education is supposed to develop.

If a student can generate an apparently competent essay in seconds, what exactly are we assessing when we ask for an essay? If an AI system can produce a plausible answer to a technical problem, how do we establish whether the student understands the reasoning? If students increasingly rely on automated tools to summarise readings, are they still developing the patience and analytical capacity required for sustained intellectual engagement?

These questions should lead us to rethink assessment. We may need greater use of oral examinations, project-based assessment, portfolios, presentations, practical demonstrations and assignments that require students to explain and defend their reasoning. Not every examination should disappear. Nor should every assessment become a group project. But we should be much more deliberate about matching assessment methods to the learning outcomes we value.

We must distinguish between a student who can produce an answer and one who understands how to arrive at, evaluate and defend that answer.

At the University of Ghana, the approval of our institutional AI Policy reflects our recognition that AI requires thoughtful governance and responsible integration into teaching, learning and research.

But I want to raise another issue, particularly important for African universities.

Whose languages, knowledge and experiences are represented in the AI systems our students use? As a linguist, I am particularly conscious of the inequalities embedded in the digital representation of languages.

Many African languages remain poorly represented in the datasets and technologies driving contemporary AI. Even when a system recognises a language, it may struggle with local names, accents, expressions and culturally specific meanings. If these systems become increasingly central to education, we must ask whether they will expand access to knowledge or reinforce existing linguistic and epistemic inequalities.

This is another reason African universities cannot remain passive consumers of technological innovation.

We must participate in shaping the technologies themselves, contributing African languages, knowledge systems, research and ethical perspectives. AI should help us widen the possibilities of education.

But it must not diminish the qualities that make education profoundly human: curiosity, imagination, empathy, ethical judgement, critical reasoning and the capacity to engage meaningfully with others.

The future of higher education should not be a choice between technology and humanity. It should be about using technology to deepen our humanity.

6. The African University as a Site of Pedagogical Innovation

Let me make a broader observation.

When discussions about educational innovation take place, there is sometimes an implicit assumption that the most important ideas

originate in well-resourced institutions elsewhere and must then be transferred to African universities. We should certainly learn from good practice wherever it exists. Problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, undergraduate research, experiential learning, community engagement and flexible delivery models offer valuable lessons.

But the African higher education experience also has much to contribute. Our universities routinely operate at the intersection of ambitious educational missions, significant social expectations, rapidly growing demand and constrained resources.

These conditions are challenging. But they have also required ingenuity. Across the continent, institutions are exploring ways of connecting education with entrepreneurship, community needs, digital learning and locally relevant research.

For example, the African Leadership University has placed considerable emphasis on self-directed learning, real-world challenges and professional development.

The University of Cape Town's Hasso Plattner School of Design Thinking in Africa has contributed to approaches that bring multidisciplinary teams together around human-centred problem-solving.

The African Institute for Mathematical Sciences has demonstrated the value of intensive, collaborative, research-oriented learning and international academic networks in advanced scientific training.

These models differ substantially, and none should be treated as universally applicable.

Their shared lesson is that learning becomes powerful when students are challenged to take intellectual responsibility, collaborate across boundaries and apply their capabilities to meaningful questions.

At UG, our own experience has taught us that innovation need not always begin with a large new building or an expensive technology platform. Sometimes it begins when a lecturer changes how students engage with a problem. Sometimes it begins when practitioners are

brought into the classroom to connect theory with professional experience. Sometimes it begins when students from different disciplines are given the opportunity to work together.

And sometimes it begins when an institution recognises that a practice it has taken for granted is excluding students who should be able to participate.

We should therefore approach pedagogical innovation with both ambition and realism. We need to learn from global best practices, but we must adapt them thoughtfully to our circumstances.

A method that works with twenty students in a well-equipped seminar room may require considerable adaptation in a class of four hundred. A digital learning model that assumes uninterrupted connectivity may be unsuitable where students face significant data costs. An assessment method that works in one disciplinary context may not be appropriate in another. The goal is not to imitate innovation. It is to improve learning. That distinction should guide our choices.

7. Transforming Teaching Requires Transforming Institutions

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a danger in conversations such as this. We identify the need for active learning, interdisciplinary teaching, digital competence, inclusion and innovative assessment.

Then we return to our institutions and place the entire responsibility for change on individual lecturers. But teaching does not take place in an institutional vacuum. If we want academics to teach differently, universities must create the conditions that enable them to do so. That means investing in professional development.

At the University of Ghana, our Centre for Teaching and Learning Innovation has an important role in supporting lecturers to improve their teaching practices and explore new approaches. But I readily acknowledge that having such a centre is only the beginning.

We must encourage wider participation in professional development, strengthen peer learning and make pedagogical reflection a normal part of academic life.

We must also examine how our institutions recognise and reward teaching. Research productivity is essential to a university's intellectual vitality. I lead a university that aspires to strengthen its standing as a research-intensive institution, and I would never suggest otherwise.

But research excellence and teaching excellence should not be treated as competing ambitions. A distinguished researcher who is also an effective teacher can inspire students to become researchers themselves.

And good teaching can expose students to the excitement, uncertainty and creativity of genuine intellectual inquiry. Our institutional systems must recognise that contribution.

Workload models, promotion criteria, teaching support and opportunities for pedagogical innovation all deserve attention.

University leaders must also create space for experimentation. Not every new teaching approach will succeed immediately. Some will need refinement. Others may prove unsuitable. But if academics believe that any departure from familiar practice will be discouraged, innovation will

remain limited.

Leadership must create an environment in which thoughtful experimentation is supported, evidence is gathered, and effective practices are shared.

And we must listen to students. Students are not simply consumers of an educational service. They are participants in a learning community.

Their experiences can tell us where our teaching is effective, where our systems create unnecessary barriers and where our assumptions no longer hold.

At UG, we have sought to strengthen opportunities for student engagement and participation in university governance. This reflects a wider conviction that a people-centred university must take seriously the voices of the people whose lives and futures are shaped by its decisions.

Reimagining pedagogy therefore requires more than changing classroom methods.

It requires institutional leadership, faculty development, appropriate incentives, student participation and sustained commitment. Without these, even the most compelling ideas will remain isolated experiments.

8. Towards a Renewed Promise of Higher Education

As I draw to a close, let me return to the question with which I began.

If we were designing the university for the first time today, would we design it exactly as it is? I suspect most of us would say no. But I also suspect we would retain much that is fundamental to the university.

We would still value rigorous scholarship, intellectual freedom, critical inquiry, disciplinary expertise and the pursuit of knowledge. We would still need spaces in which difficult questions can be asked, evidence interrogated and ideas challenged.

And we would still need universities to preserve knowledge, produce new knowledge and transmit intellectual traditions across generations.

What must change is not our commitment to these purposes, but how we

fulfil them in a changing world.

For university leaders, the challenge is to create institutional conditions that make excellent, inclusive and innovative teaching possible.

For academics, it is to reconsider what we ask students to do with the knowledge we share and how we support them to develop independence of thought.

For students, it is to recognise that university education is not simply something delivered to them. It is an opportunity they must actively engage with, question and help shape.

And for African universities collectively, the challenge is to ensure that our graduates are not merely prepared to participate in a world designed by others. They must be equipped to help design that world. We need graduates who can think critically about technology rather than simply use it.

Graduates who understand their societies while engaging confidently with the world. Graduates who can work across disciplinary, cultural

and national boundaries.

Graduates who recognise that professional success carries responsibilities to communities and to the wider public good. And graduates who are prepared not only for existing opportunities, but also to create opportunities where none appear to exist.

The 21st-century university must therefore be both intellectually rigorous and socially responsive; globally connected and locally grounded; technologically capable and deeply human. Above all, it must be a place where learning transforms possibilities.

Colleagues, we cannot prepare students for tomorrow simply by teaching yesterday's knowledge through yesterday's methods.

But neither should we mistake technological novelty for educational transformation. The true measure of pedagogical innovation is not how differently we teach, but how deeply our students learn, how independently they think, and how meaningfully they are able to contribute to society. That is the promise we must renew. That is the

responsibility before us. And that is why reimagining pedagogy is not simply an academic exercise. It is central to the future of our universities, our graduates and our societies.

I thank the University of Lagos once again for the invitation, and I wish you a productive and stimulating International Week.

Thank you.

Prof. Nana Aba Appiah Amfo

Vice-Chancellor

October 13, 2026