



# Reflections on the Vision of Obiora Ike

Shared Values and Education  
for the Common Good:  
Bridges for a New Humanity

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## **Keywords**

Technology, ethical values, education, social class inequality, Africa and higher education, inclusiveness.

## **Abstract**

In her article, around the vision of Obiora Ike, the author presents how multi-cultural education is made possible, in a world where, as university education functions as a fantastic bridge builder, it is a good catalyst for social reforms and equality. University is a place for dynamical leadership at all levels and for a peaceful engagement along the advancement of the digital revolution and reliance on information technology.

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# 1. Introduction

Explicitly challenging the notions and meaning of *human* in humankind, in 2017 already Obiora Ike reflected on the reality of the world on a precipice. Raising the alarm, he cautions:

“ Globally, issues of ethics are legion. In the media reporting on local and international cases of scandals around the themes of corruption, bad governance, abuse of public trust, value-less lifestyles, unethical behaviour, nepotism and mediocrity it makes common sense to accept the fact that there is a better way to conduct the affairs of men and women, namely The Ethical Way. (Ike 2017: 17)

The picture painted is easily transposed as a reflection on the state of world today for little appears to have changed. The results of the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer confirm this with the following opening statement: *We find a world ensnared in a vicious cycle of distrust*. The following of the summarized top 10 outcomes are particularly apposite:

“ 01: Nearly 60% of respondents said their default tendency was distrust until they had clear evidence that something could be trusted.

06: Moreover, no developed countries believe their families and self will be better off in five years' time.

The theme of global social dysfunctionality linked to “a general gap of persons lacking in the practice of ethical values” is consistent in many of Ike’s published reflections. However, with his inimitable talent to find the good and decent in all and his unrivalled hope for the future and a world where people - irrespective of difference - can live together in harmony, he argues that that while today we find that “much of humanity stands on the crossroads of insecurity, wars, corruption, economic and social upheavals, the challenges of the present create great opportunities, chances and hope for humanity, using the tools of education to promote responsible leaders who govern nations and institutions across cultures and borders. (Ike 2017:22)

In wholly espousing the Ethical Way as an important panacea for the escalating trepidations and global crises confronting humanity, Ike (2019: 16) points out that

“ [Ethics is] the constant basic need, which guides personal conduct, governs common interests including public, state and corporate actions and indeed is applied to everything that serves life. ... Although expressed in different ways in each individual, culture, custom and forms of diversity, the human heart is still essentially one-and-the-same. ... [F]inding ethics and behaving ethically is possible for each person and all persons. But it needs a cultivated education to nurture and grow.

“Education,” he thus concludes, is at the centre of every human settlement. It is necessary for character formation ...” (2019: 16) as ethics “touch the core of the human person, human dignity, and all the obligations that flow from the nature and dignity of the human person in relation to oneself, others, community, society and the world. (Ike 2016: 44)

## 2. The effects of globalization

Today while state sovereignty is respected for legal purposes, in all other respects - political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural - the world functions as a global village with few boundaries when it comes to communication, engagement and relationships. This has been undoubtedly enhanced by the tsunami of technology which has effectively eliminated most of the previous boundaries. Today, personal, business, and social interactions are epitomized by multifaceted diversity and pluralism, with different people sharing the same spaces and being part of one community. Concurring with a one-world description, Ike (2016: 44) also points out that:

“ Globalisation has led to much closer engagements and interaction between different value systems. This is [however] simultaneously enriching and challenging.

One of the most vivid visual and aural descriptions of globalization is that presented by Dixon (2009: 1):

“ Imagine the vast spectrum of all the cultures in the world. Listen to the music - from the gentle drumbeats of Africa, to the melodic didgeridoo of Australia, to the scream of the electric guitar. Taste the curry from India, the coconut milk from Thailand, the cheeseburger from the United States. Now imagine that all these cultures are compressed into one super-culture.

How to come to a common understanding when one has to live together within a space of such incredible diversity requires (i) sensitivity, (ii) awareness, and (iii) a balancing act between (a) finding common values, and (b) respecting the differences and beliefs of ‘the other’.

### 3. Understanding values

Philosophers, leaders, academics, and polymaths have all contributed to the discourse on *understanding values*. The following statements help with creating an appreciation how the discussion has been framed and the common emerging standards.

“ You are mistaken my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action – that is, whether he is acting right or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one.

— Plato’s *Apology*

As the years progress one increasingly realizes the importance of friendship and human solidarity. And if a 90-year-old may offer some unsolicited advice on this occasion, it would be that you, irrespective of your age, should place human solidarity, the concern for the other, at the centre of the values by which you live.

— Nelson Mandela

Values are basic and fundamental beliefs that guide or motivate attitudes and actions and guide our interaction with the world around us.

— Steven Mintz (@ethicssage)

Universally, values have come to be accepted as a set of principles or standards of behaviour regarded as desirable, important and held in high esteem by a particular society in which a person lives.

— Obiora Ike (2016: 43)

With the increasingly recognition for humanity in the global village - with the concomitant dynamics of difference and diversity and key considerations of inclusion - one of the most significant human values must be that of *harmony*. Confucius was one of the earliest philosophers exhorting harmony as a guiding principle in interpersonal relationships and social roles, notes Chen (2009: 464), pithily describing the value of harmony as:

“ [A] human value, referring to compatibility and accord in feelings, actions, relationships, opinions, interests, etc. It denotes a state of balance among forces influencing and even opposing one another.

If it is the value of *social harmony* that is the lodestar that undergirds the success of people living together as peaceful and sustainable communities then, harmony in multicultural societies demands that the equality of cultures must be recognized. However, it needs to be immediately explained that this does not assume that cultures should become the same across the world (Sotshangane 20160): rather, explains Ike (2011: 310) if someone does something differently, it is important that we learn that rather than mock or reject the behaviour, we learn to ask: *Why is this so?*

“ In intercultural exchanges, cultural divergence amongst the people can easily result in misunderstanding with a variety of consequences which are unhealthy for peace and for

the sustainable balance needed for individuals and communities worldwide. (Ike 2011: 310-311)

If harmony is a pre-eminent value of social cohesion, then biases and prejudices have no place, and other perspectives must be given spaces and voices.

Reflecting on Africa specifically as a critical example of living in harmony and avoiding what Sotshangane (2016: 1) describes as “the negative effects of the globalization process”, Ike (2016: 310) points out that when dealing with Africans “it is critically necessary to be allowed to present an African perspective without the use of interpreters in a search for knowledge and its transfer across cultures.” Similarly, emphasizes Sotshangane (2016: 6), it is not just about knowledge difference but requires a deeper understanding of how the differences came about and why they exist. The same cautionary note is apposite beyond the African experience, particularly in understanding and enabling equality of minority communities in the global village. It is reiterated for emphasis, that where social harmony is the outcome, globalisation cannot be equated with uniformization (See Sotshangane 2016: 16) However, notes Dixon (2009: 1) referring specifically to the U.S.A., hegemonic dominance is not always the construct of the so-called dominant power and “other developed countries in China and Europe are also at fault as they reinforce American culture globally.” (Dixon 2009:1)

The issue of cultural uniqueness is not a new one. Cultural distinctions should never be allowed to be subsumed under the notion of a global monoculture as globalization comes to the fore as it will render sterile the widely recognized vibrance and contributions of diversity. For example, in decision-making, daily people face challenges and choices and often these are layered. People with different backgrounds means different perspectives and other insights are brought into the considerations and all together, the richness of views enhances the final decision.

## 4. The function of education and the university

Borrowing from Immanuel Kant: *How then is perfection to be sought? Wherein lies our hope? In education and nothing else.* Reiterating the message but with specific reference to the function of higher education, Ike (2019: 41) states, “University education plays a vital role in the welfare and well-being of global society.”

The role and purpose of the university in this regard is succinctly summarized in Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030:

“ SDG Target 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development including among others, though education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture’s contribution to sustainable development.

In 1998, the World Conference on Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century hosted by UNESCO (UNESCO 1998: 4) again stressed the cultural and ethical mission of higher education “which, in the age in which we live, is one of the highest priorities of education in general.” Against this backdrop, it is essential to affirm and recognize an important statement that as the world looks to higher education institutions to support the mission to promote shared values and harmony in a multicultural world, “values, character and integrity require more than mere formal knowledge.” (Ike 2019: 42) In addition to providing discipline specificity and knowledge, a critical role of the university must be to equally prepare the citizenry to become enlightened and civic-minded persons.

Further illuminating his proposition, Ike (2019: 48) suggests that the two key elements in understanding the meaning of university are Knowledge and Value Provider. Universities stand or fail by their ability or inability to deliver on these criteria, he contends. “Properly stated, education conveys learning and character - if it provides only one aspect, it lacks in wholeness and humanity suffers.” (Ike 2019: 48) The magnitude of this obligation can only be

fully comprehended when one understands that to fail will have an impact not only on a limited cohort of students or a single community but on generations of people, entire societies and the repercussions will be global. An example of this was the financial crisis of 2008. In describing the cause and (shocking) effect, Ike (2017: 20-21) notes:

“ ... teachers in Business schools and educational institutions who had over the years turned out first class students and highly successful professionals and excellent specialists wondered at how this could happen with their bright students acting in freedom as ‘moral crooks’ but lacking in responsibility and virtue! Educational institutions produced them. These institutions are challenged to revisit their educational content, the school curricula and their overall systems which produce bright managers lacking in integrity and engage in teaching, training and research that links the heart and the mind of the human person in wholeness.

The context of a new vision for education also calls for a mindset shift from reading and writing to skills acquisition with relevance for daily life and society. Evaluating the contribution of the university sector, Ike posits that our higher education institutions are currently not optimally serving the vision set by UNESCO.

“ People receive half-baked knowledge during studies, learning a certain discipline on knowledge but lack concrete link of such knowledge to other practical aspects of daily life. (2019: 48)

Further and linked to his reasoning for the financial crisis debacle, he suggests that for too long universities have focused their education and research towards specific academic disciplines, unfortunately overlooking the fact that most of the problems that research and education are supposed to help us solve are not defined in terms of disciplines. (Ike 2019: 57) There is no gain-saying that the society in which we are living has become somewhat distorted – we appreciate power, profits, and development is measured in terms of market capital and market share which is why the powerful thrive, corruption has



become endemic, and consequences are few. Discussions on integrity, sustainability and accountability have become the quiet sounds on the fringes.

Again, reflecting on the 1962 UNESCO Conference when African universities were called upon to particularly make themselves “more relevant and useful” to the communities they serve, Ike (2019: 43) decries the fact that “[a]s we write, it is doubtful if the ambitions of the last fifty years have become a reality.” The result is “a new generation of young people, eager to live well and move on, but not knowing how.” (Ike 2019: 24) Reform must start with them, urges Ike, by inculcating in them an understanding of what is ‘human in humankind’.

## 5. University leadership and social accountability

Today, looking at the news reports, it is so easy to lament *How is this happening to us?*, but David Meltzer suggests that a much better question is *How is this happening through us?* He points out that it is only when there is a fundamental understanding of things happening ‘through us’ (or because of us) that the much-needed skill of accountability comes to the fore with the realisation that people have choices – one can either be part of the problem or part of the solution – and it is this simple awareness that makes the difference.

With this consciousness, it is also critical to accept that the university is a microcosm of the wider community with a long reach to the broader community/ies being served. Universities today have become complex environments, and the long lists of administration and compliance activities can easily confuse the true purpose of universities, resulting in academics and administrators being over-extended and losing focus. This is a critical management dilemma. Universities today, more than ever before, need to be defined by a clear and focused strategy that facilitates a learning journey for students which epitomizes the time-honored role and function of the university providing *education for the common good*. There is a need for academic leaders to buy-in to the mantra that (i) balances the value of discipline knowledge with (ii) the importance of promoting skills and the ability of graduates to apply their learning in the workplace. (iii) Framing this experience, the following

graduate attributes must be embedded and integrated into the curriculum: independent thinking, innovation, creativity, and social responsibility. The triad of aptitude, skills, and attitude must find equilibrium in the university strategy if higher education is to achieve its noble aspiration of being a positive change-maker globally.

However, if universities are to change, then university leadership must change. “To achieve success in a globally changing and challenging environment, universities need to be flexible enough in their structures, management and culture,” notes Ile. (2019: 41) Universities as never before require dynamic leadership and courageous managers and staff who understand the rising aspirations of a global society that needs peace, progress, development, and happiness. Abdicating such leadership in an attempting to cover up poor management decisions is something that cannot stand if our society is to be free and virtuous. (Ike 2019: 45; 2017: 20) It against this backdrop that academics and university leaders as the proclaimed thought-leaders in our global village need to look at how graduates are being prepared for their role in society, through what is being shared during the critical years in higher education. While it is also true that the engagement with values does not begin at university – we all acknowledge that it should begin much earlier in the home and in the school - but if that is not happening, then universities also cannot say, *It is not my responsibility!*

## 6. Technology, education, access, and social class inequality

While it is well and good to speak of using education to prepare socially responsible citizens who understand the importance of values and the common good, there is also a need for a serious understanding of the fact that access to education is still not freely and widely accessible to all. Dealing with this issue specifically, South Africa’s apex court - the Constitutional Court - held:

“ The uneven power relations that marked slavery, colonialism, the industrial age and the information economy are girded, in a great part, by inadequate access to quality teaching

and learning. (Federation of Governing Bodies for South African Schools (FEDSAS) v MEC, Gauteng and Ano, at 14)

Today, into this crucible of adversities, can be added the digital age of technology and the emerging focus of artificial intelligence. A reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century engagement and functionality is the tsunami of technology advanced ‘to make life easier’. It would, therefore, be remiss not to raise the issues of technological disruption and the ethics of AI and machine learning that are becoming the rage in many higher education institutions globally. One of the most significant risks of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is for persons to become sucked into the hype and excitement of technology and, fearful of being left behind, inadvertently entrenching existing or propagating new-style inequalities. (Singh and Singh 2022: 192) This reality has never been more acutely evident in education than during the COVID pandemic when education was forced to adopt remote teaching and learning supported by technology. Research studies in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic highlight amongst the most common problems associated with online education the following: availability, speed and cost of the internet, accessibility to electronic devices to access the internet, and both student and staff limitations in online classroom engagement. While students from all race, gender and socio-economic groups were affected, Bonal and Gonzalez (2020) confirm that inequalities in families’ economic, social and cultural capital have a definite impact on students’ learning opportunities. They record that middle class families were better able to maintain higher digitised standards of education while students from socially disadvantaged families had few learning opportunities in terms of time and learning experience. Further, they note that even when students could connect, remote learning seems to have widened the existing attainment gap between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. (Bonal and Gonzalez 2020: 635 & 640) Echoing this challenge, Alvero et al (2020: section 2.3) reiterate that “AI is often described as having the ability to rapidly scale discrimination and exacerbate social inequality.”

If one accepts that education is one of the key drivers of economic success, then the unequal access to technology, systems, and platforms will result in

further discrimination of already underprivileged and disadvantaged communities, inevitably further exacerbating the economic divide, in contradiction to the norms set out in Sustainable Development Goals 2030:

- Target 4.1: By 2030, ensure that all complete free, *equitable*, and quality primary and secondary education.
- Target 4.5: By 2030, ensure equal access to all levels of education for the *vulnerable*.

[my summary and emphasis]

Or, as succinctly highlighted by Ike (2016: 53):

“ The eradication of poverty is supported by equal access to quality education and a fairer society so that everyone who receives education can have more options in their lives and fulfil their aspirations.

Our challenge will be to balance the competing priorities wrought by technology and digitalisation, taking the best from both without compromising that which makes us human.

## 7. Conclusion

Ike (2019: 15) pointedly reminds of the pithy reflections of C.S. Lewis: “Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make [the human] a more clever devil.”

So, where do we need to focus if we take seriously the insights of Ike:

1. Shoring up the legacy of Ike’s teachings to promote **harmony in the multicultural global village** characterized by equal respect for all constituent cultures, is Ike’s own recommendation to higher education leadership. Higher education must launch a new intercultural and intercommunicative dialogue that presents itself as a fundamental human right as we emerge in the new millennium, notes Ike.
2. **Are universities the appropriate bridge builders for a new humanity?** The philosopher Socrates teaches us that self-knowledge is sufficient to good life. He identifies knowledge with virtue and postulates

that if knowledge can be learned, so too can virtue. Ergo, states Socrates, virtue can be taught. Accepting this position, universities must be one of the critical facilitators of social reform. Ethics and values can be nurtured through research, training, teaching, and administration, points out Ike. Education founded on values brings values-driven principles into the heart of humans and makes them original, ethical, and beneficial to all. Concomitantly, it helps the building of a future generation of responsible citizens and leaders. (Ike 2017: 16-19) In short, when ethics education is embedded in the curriculum and defines the student journey, it affects the lives of the next generation and sets the foundation for a better society.

3. **Dynamic leadership** is one of the services a university provides to society. In today’s world, we need an education system which facilitates and promotes the emergence of a new humanity of responsible leaders driven by values and virtues and sufficiently knowledgeable to transform their environment and serve entire humanity in a new society yearning for ethical and fair minded-leaders. (Ike 2019: 29) The question is whether we have a university system and cadre up to this challenge, or as Ike (2017: 18) notes, “Can the teacher give to students what the teacher does not possess?” Similarly, Davids (2018: 5 & 3) claims that:

“If one accepts that it is possible to *teach* learners how to be democratic citizens, then the first point of concern centres on who does the teaching.”

And:

“ It is not unusual to find an unwillingness on the part of certain teachers and school leaders to break from the past by persisting with practices that continue to be couched in a language of authoritarianism and alienation. ... [V]alues such as compassion, respect, acknowledging the other, responsibility, participation and inclusion, appear to be ideas that remain remote from what it means to teach and to learn.

4. A significant factor when contemplating the university as a contributor to the promotion of the values of social responsibility, and a community

of peaceful engagement is the **advancement of the digital revolution and reliance on information technology (IT)**. In this regard, Ike (2016: 45) warns:

“ ... while the digital revolution is being hailed in many quarters, we are also witness to the challenges and abuse of technology which today [has, regrettably, been allowed to] control the human person (and not the other way around).

With specific reference to access to education, he underscores that:

“ Universal access to education and a fair society are not about promoting economic growth. They are about ensuring human dignity. These challenges call upon our sense of ethical responsibility. It is this challenge that the SDGs and Globethics.net seek to confront. (Ike 2016: 53)

How universities, societies, countries, and the world respond will be critical to the ultimate pursuit of the fundamental values of equality and dignity for all. The global challenges behoove all to take urgent stock of what is happening and what is needed to redeem humanity – and when we get an opportunity for positive change, we just can't mess it up! Accentuating the importance of building bridges for a new humanity before it is too late, Ike's illuminating commentary bears repeating:

“ From a global perspective, there is a noticeable consensus and rejection of the world and its governance structures as it is currently experienced because many believe that it was meant to be different and much better. These worldwide challenges do not leave us in apathy or lethargy but challenge renewed, urgent and value-driven action to redeem humanity at this time. (2016: 44-45)

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## 9. Short biography

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