

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

NICO CLOETE, PETER MAASSEN and TRACY BAILEY, editors, *Knowledge Production and Contradictory Functions in African Higher Education*. Cape Town: African Minds (pb £29.95 – 978 1 920677 85 5; free e-version available at <<http://chet.org.za/books/knowledge-production-and-contradictory-functions-african-higher-education>>). 2015, 312 pp.

If there was any uncertainty, the grand scale of the African Higher Education Summit, hosted by the Senegalese government in March, emphasized that higher education (HE) has firmly returned to the continent's development agenda. The need for good scholarship, as substantial funding – domestic and foreign – is marshalled, is now more important than ever, particularly if the summit's call for a 'high quality, massive, vibrant, diverse, differentiated, innovative, autonomous and socially responsible higher education sector', to drive the African Union's Agenda 2063, is to be realized. This volume, which brings together twenty-two contributing authors in twelve chapters, makes an important contribution to the knowledge base that an array of domestic and international policy makers, planners, capacity builders and university staff need in order to make best use of scarce resources.

The book moves beyond historical and descriptive accounts, based on limited available data, to a carefully and deeply researched investigation into the university systems of eight countries. (The authors characterize these accounts as 'hasty studies' followed by 'high profile conferences with grand declarations'.) It is this commitment to painstaking data gathering (working to improve university data collection systems as the project proceeded) that marks out both this collection and the eight years of work by the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA) that underpin it.

The book starts from an understanding that if Africa's HE is to fulfil its potential as an 'engine of development' it must have strong, research-intensive universities, founded on a strong academic core, and a clear agreement about what they are there to do. It identifies eight 'flagship' universities: the universities of Botswana, Cape Town, Dar es Salaam, Eduardo Mondlane (Mozambique), Ghana, Makerere (Uganda), Mauritius and Nairobi. The early chapters examine their research performance, including publishing and international collaboration, while subsequent chapters explore the perceptions and motivations of academics in Kampala, Nairobi and Maputo. Three further chapters examine the functions of science granting councils and national HE councils, and the contributions universities make through community engagement and to civic life through developing the 'citizenship competencies' of students.

The book's examination of the different ways in which universities can and do play a developmental role is its particular strength. By compiling a detailed dataset (postgraduate enrolments and graduations, academic staff and their qualifications, research publications and citation impact, grant income) for eight 'flagship' universities, it offers a way to compare some of the continent's leading universities in empirical terms, and from this to begin to ask deeper questions about performance and about what lies behind these observed variations. Through revealing comparisons between institutions, which show that with similar 'inputs' universities are achieving very different 'outputs', it forces us to look deeper to understand the production and circulation of knowledge within HE institutions.

The authors show how the eight universities are beset by contradictory and competing pressures, with little agreement or consensus between those who

expect them to be institutions of ‘excellence’ and those who demand evidence of their direct contribution to social or economic development. University strategies may emphasize research but fail to translate this into incentives or pressure at departmental level to advance research, leading to a disconnect between the corporate ambitions of the institution and its leadership and the day-to-day practice of its staff.

The language of research-intensive ‘flagship’ universities is important, as the authors make a clear distinction with the ‘world-class’ label, so closely tied to global rankings and the distortions they bring. It is an important distinction, in a year that has seen the UK’s *Times Higher Education* introduce a dedicated African rankings exercise. It is frustrating, however, that, while seeking to explore ‘contradictory functions’ in ‘knowledge production’, the book emphasizes publication in ISI-ranked journals as a measure of productivity. While acknowledging that these represent ‘merely a tip of the iceberg’, there is a persistent assumption that a university’s contribution to knowledge production for development is measured firstly in the formal production of journal articles, and secondly in articles that reach the major ‘international’ journals. To really understand the connection between African universities and the continent’s development, we urgently need to understand the other, less visible ways in which they contribute knowledge to African communities.

The book is at its most interesting as it begins to go beyond the numerically described ‘outputs’, financial data and other metrics to consider the human aspects of research, and its social and cultural dimensions, but this section is substantially briefer than I would have liked. Musiige and Maassen suggest in their chapter on Makerere University in Uganda (Chapter 6) that an exploration of norms, philosophies, behaviour and leadership can offer substantially richer ways to understand why research is and isn’t undertaken. Comparing Makerere and Cape Town, the authors suggest that academic cultures are likely to be very different where, despite similar levels of research income, in one academics’ research is predominantly funded by competitively secured grants (Cape Town), while in the other (Makerere) funding comes from donor money secured through internally administered research funds. A further chapter by Wangenge-Ouma, Lutomiah and Langa considers Nairobi and Eduardo Mondlane universities. As the authors show, promotion at the University of Nairobi is conditional on undertaking and publishing research, but teaching loads prevent this. For most academics, the university is therefore just one master, with donor consultancies and fee-paying second-stream students (often taught ‘after hours’) providing a more reliable income. Although promising a new lens for understanding research activity, the two chapters only begin to scratch the surface of these vital questions and, I hope, represent the beginning rather than the completion of the HERANA project’s work on these issues.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972016000127

ALLEN F. ISAACMAN and BARBARA S. ISAACMAN, *Dams, Displacement, and the Delusion of Development: Cahora Bassa and its legacies in Mozambique, 1965–2007*. Athens OH: University of Ohio Press (pb \$32.95 – 978 0 82142 0 331). 2013, xvi + 291pp.