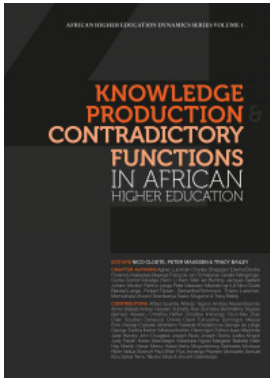


An assessment of eight African universities: Contradictory functions, knowledge production and pacts

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Nico Cloete, Peter Maassen and
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REVIEWER:

Fred M. Hayward

EMAIL:

haywardfred@hotmail.com

AFFILIATION:

Senior Higher Education Advisor,
University of Massachusetts,
Amherst, Massachusetts, USA

POSTAL ADDRESS:

3628 Van Ness St. NW,
Washington DC 20008, USA

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This study of higher education in eight sub-Saharan nations in Africa was built around a research project of the Higher Education Research and Advocacy Network in Africa (HERANA). It was initiated by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET) in 2007 and includes data on these institutions from two different surveys, the second completed in 2013/2014. The study shows a great deal of thought and care in its preparation, a difficult task in its undertaking, data gathering, and presentation, and is an impressive and useful study which will be of interest to most scholars of Africa. It is an important addition to the literature on higher education in Africa. The effort to assess the relationship between higher education and development, economics and democracy in Africa is timely and well-conceived, and provides a wealth of very useful information on higher education in Africa. There has been evidence of this research by Cloete et al. over the last few years and it was with great anticipation that I read the final result of their efforts. It was well worth the wait. The eight higher education institutions that are the focus of this research are in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda and provide an excellent representation of the status of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa.

This book is an attempt to provide a data driven analysis using performance indicators of eight universities picked as comparable 'flagship' institutions to assess their success as knowledge-producing and research-intensive institutions in the age of the knowledge economy. The study involved an assessment of the core functions of the university and the success of these African universities in those areas. The authors see knowledge production and technological innovation as the most important productive forces of higher education institutions (p.5). All this is in a context of years of declining funding for African higher education, tremendous growth in enrolments, staff shortages, and a variety of economic, political and social problems within the region as a whole. The authors call for the 'revitalisation' of African higher education as a result of their study.

The authors assess the eight institutions based on a set of eight measurable goals and targets: enrolments in science and technology, strong master's and doctoral enrolments but with a majority of undergraduates, a high proportion of permanent academic staff in senior ranks, well-qualified senior staff, low student to academics ratios, high outputs of graduates in SET fields, high outputs of master's and doctoral degrees, and high levels of new knowledge production (p.39). The institutions examined were the Universities of Botswana, Cape Town, Dar es Salaam, Eduardo Mondlane, Ghana, Makerere, Mauritius and Nairobi. Only the University of Cape Town meets all the targets; the Universities of Mauritius, Dar es Salaam and Makerere come close. At the same time the authors explore, as the book title suggests, the contradictory functions and pressures on these institutions – on the one hand, the pressure to produce knowledge useful to national development, and on the other hand, the contradictory pressures of fundraising, public service, outside jobs, growing enrolments and thus pressure on teaching loads, lack of research funding, the growth of fee-paying students, etc. That in and of itself is an especially interesting and telling discussion which plays out throughout the book and demonstrates how difficult it is to move in the direction of the targets set out for flagship institutions by the project and to establish universities which truly make a contribution to national development.

The first chapter by Nico Cloete and Peter Maassen on the 'Roles of Universities and the African Context' provides an excellent introduction to the study, drawing heavily on Manuel Castells, who was very influential in the project, as well as Clark Kerr and others who place this work in the proper higher education intellectual context. They spell out four major functions of higher education: production of values and social legitimisation; selection of elites; training of the labour force; and production of scientific knowledge. They then trace the development and complexity of these functions, historically placing Africa in context – one which has not been a picture of great success. The next chapters lay out data collected for the project in each of the project institutions, where possible, with most chapters focusing on two or three of the institutions. What is impressive, as someone who has done multi-country research can attest, is the care taken to make the data comparable, and the straightforwardness of the authors in noting the problems, inconsistencies and differences in the various comparisons they present.

Chapter two, on research universities, makes the case for the importance of research universities – but notes that for the most part the research universities examined are not strengthening their knowledge-generating capacity and are failing to make a substantive contribution to new knowledge generation. Nonetheless, they note that the universities are virtually the only producers of knowledge in Africa. Of the eight universities studied, only the University of Cape Town attains the requirements of a 'high quality research and scholarship delivering knowledge producer', with Makerere University somewhat behind (p.29). The authors go on to note that higher education remains the best, and in most cases, the only institution capable of knowledge production in Africa, in spite of its many weaknesses, and emphasise the importance of efforts to revitalise higher education, especially the research and knowledge production functions.

Chapter three, on the flagship universities, presents what seems to me to be too glowing a picture of these institutions. Much of the information presents a sorry picture of the situation of research at these universities, but the data gathered is very important in placing research and knowledge production in its current unsatisfactory context. The case of Makerere, with its low level of research, is a telling one – the discussion is of a variety of factors that hinder research, plus the negative consequences of the admission of self-funded students on research prospects. The discussion is an excellent demonstration of the contractions noted in the title of the book – both in statements of intent to carry out research and the lack of actual support and facilitation thereof.

In Chapter six, the authors stress ‘...the potential contribution of academic research to African societies cannot be overstated’ (p.110). I heartily agree with them. It is encouraging that both research and knowledge production are so strongly emphasised and are not written off as expectations for other parts of the world, but not Africa. The authors go on to point out that almost all sub-Saharan African universities are struggling to improve their academic research productivity with little success.

Chapter seven, on ‘Academic Incentives for Knowledge Production’, is a particularly poignant piece contrasting the incentives in South Africa for publications with the situations in Mozambique, Kenya and, to some extent, the rest of Africa. It is an excellent description of the commercialisation of the university and the ways in which a combination of low salaries, lack of support, and donor foci have ‘undermined the possibility of establishing a research culture’. The authors note that other than in South Africa there is little by way of financial incentive for research – that the major incentive is the drive for knowledge production (p.129). This section is excellent.

The findings emphasise the lack of connection between research institutions, even those involved in this and other projects. Indeed, they point out that the stronger connections are with research partners abroad. This is not too surprising given the disparities of research support, but it is disheartening given the years of efforts to promote research linkages between African institutions by foundations, the World Bank and other funders. As they point out, most of the linkages are individual and not institutional. Most discouragingly, they point out that: ‘The university in the guise of service provider to the community, does little more than import and transfer existing knowledge instead of creating new knowledge, will at best make a marginal, short-term contribution to development’ (p.205). Overall, the study shows that the universities are largely not involved in creating new knowledge. All eight institutions are involved in a variety of activities and talk about research. However, the reality is that most are not involved in knowledge production. New pressures, limited funding, changes in the workplace, new technologies, dilution of both the academic culture and common purposes of higher education in recent years, have weakened academic commitments to institutions.

The two student surveys carried out at Makerere University and the University of Cape Town are very interesting and useful. For reasons that are clearly described, the surveys at the two institutions turned out to be less comparative than hoped. Nonetheless, the results are fascinating.

The research and write-up here are excellent, upholding high standards of research and resisting the temptation to treat the data as more than it is. They conclude that: ‘Key aspects of student experience have profound impacts on raising levels of citizen competence’ (p.256). They then explore how universities develop citizen competencies through student experiences. This work is very suggestive of the potential of universities in nation-building and a demonstration of what can be done. But to do this, the universities need adequate funding, equipment, and well-trained and committed faculty to take full advantage of what can be done. This chapter alone makes the book worth reading; it reflects excellent work. The work of HERANA on how key aspects of student experience have an impact on citizenship competence, civic education and democratisation is among the best parts of this study.

Some of the chapters, such as the one on ‘Governance of Higher Education Councils and Commissions’ are somewhat pedestrian, providing what one would expect about their purposes and functions, but then that is important information too. And for those not familiar with them, it will be useful reading.

The final chapter emphasises the need for African higher education to catch up and invest in knowledge production for teaching and development. The authors emphasise the need for research-intensive universities – at least one in each country – pointing out that only three universities focus their plans on economic development – Makerere, Botswana and Mauritius. They also emphasise the critical importance of differentiation, for focused work and to limit costs, as well as for system level recognition of the need to develop research generally.

Overall this is an excellent publication, one that most people will want to read. It shows why the knowledge production functions were not developed historically in sub-Saharan Africa, and lays out what needs to be done to get them moving, with data based on evidence. It presents especially rich and very relevant material which I have found extremely useful, as will others. As someone who has done a great deal of quantitative analysis, including survey research, and has worked on the international collection of university data, I know how very difficult it is to collect accurate and useful data of this kind. The HERANA group and CHET are to be congratulated on the care and time they took in preparing this study, gathering and checking the data, and presenting it in this book. The study breaks new ground, is a major contribution to our understanding of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa and will significantly reward the reader’s attention.

